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Article Summary: An examination of the effects of the winter of 1948 – 1949 in Nebraska illustrates key changes that took place in the state in the second half of the twentieth century. Citizens' stories of how they adapted and survived and the political aspects of relief efforts, cause the author to wonder how modern Nebraskans would fare if faced with similar circumstances.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Margaret Pruss; Harry Page; Wesley Meierhenry; G E Livermore; W D Lear; J E McCarthy; George Manes; Sue Johnson; Caroline Moody; Richmond Case; Lois Case; Art Henrickson; Robert Buchan; Cerny family; Ed Gloy; Walter Peters; Art Henrickson; A Perry Osborn; George F Ashby; E Roland Harriman; Nelson family; Frank Bataillon; Dwight Margrave; Harmon Holloman; Cal Westover; Irene Westover; Joe Westover; James Moody; Caroline Moody; Jeanette Moody; Ed Misterick; Gene Hall, James Blundell; L E Morgan; L E Wolford; Val Peterson; Rolland Quintard; Mrs Ralph Rhoads; Harold George; Leon Thompson; Ann Van Hoff; Lois Tomkins; Irene Westover; Olive Raben; Helen Swanson; H T Boland; Mrs Marvin Fuller; Henry Canenburg; Roy H Patitz; H A Phillips; Nylan Rowse; Bobby Gartner; Betty Gartner; Hope Martin; Carolyn Wintermote; Ann Mae Gartner; Clarence Kiltz; Lewis Slaymaker; Gertrude M Banks; F B Decker; Jennie Bennett; Elja McCullough; Irma Fodge; Mrs Jack Minion; Alice Brenneman; Lolajean Ickes; Alice Young Compton Tomkins; Mrs William Murphy; Thelma Young; Cal Westover; Irene Westover; Mari Sandoz; Jo Eberly; Linelle Tompkins Kelley; Harvey Tompkins; Lois Tompkins; Vicki Sue Hutton; George T Mickelson; Hugh Butler; Kenneth S Wherry; Joe W Leedom Jr; Philip Fleming; Harry S Truman; Basil O'Connor; Lewis A Pick; Donald W Stout; Gordon Gray; Rufus Howard

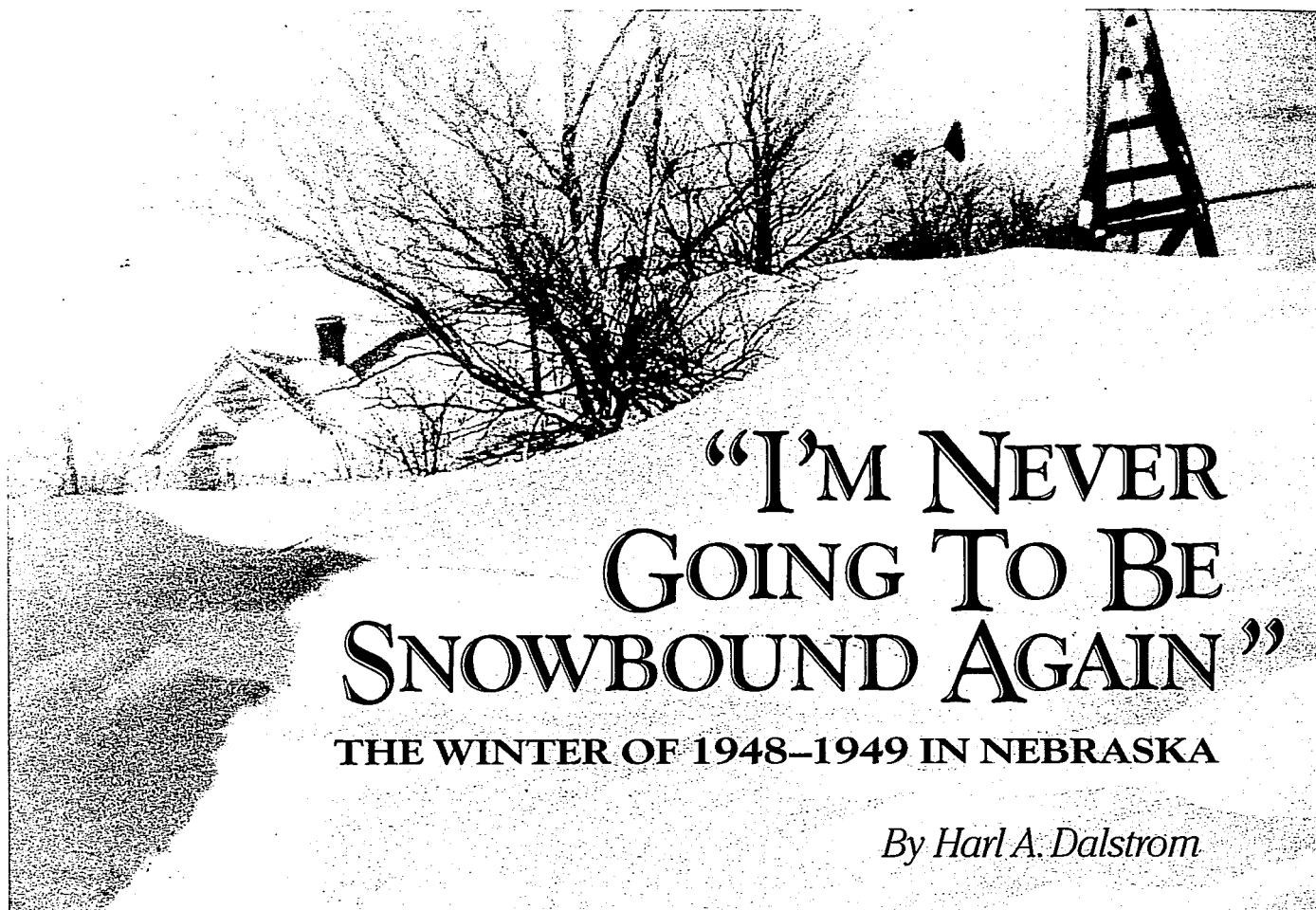
Place Names: [Because this issue-long article comprises extensive coverage of the winter of 1948 – 1949 in Nebraska, towns and cities are not listed here.]

Selected place / company names are listed for this article as follows:

Sioux Ordnance Depot; Lowry Field, Denver; Sheridan Hotel; Crownover Telephone Company; Kearney Air Force Base

Keywords:

"Sargent Leader" "McCook Daily Gazette" "Ainsworth Air Service" "Robert Hobson" "Kearney Daily Hub" "Holt County Independent" "Gordon Journal" "Western Nebraska Observer" "Chadron Record" "big weather-maker" "City of San Francisco" "Union Pacific" "Chicago and North Western" "Red Cross" "Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy line" "Red Cross" "Rock County Leader" "Burwell Tribune" "M-29 Weasel" "Weasel" "Sioux" "Pine Ridge Indian Agency" "Rosebud reservations" "Federal Works



Warm autumn weather mingled with days heralding winter mark November in Nebraska. The first two weeks of November 1948 were typical as temperatures occasionally climbed into the 60s and 70s Fahrenheit, punctuated by cold spells and scattered snow. Harrison, in the northwestern corner of the state, had some twelve inches of snow in a four-day period, but this hint of winter was very local. Nature was bountiful as well as benign, and Nebraskans could take comfort in a U.S. Department of Agriculture estimate that the 1948 corn crop would be outstanding. Little did they realize that they were on the brink of one of the worst winters in the state's history.¹

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Blizzards are not rare in the Great Plains, but a relatively sparse population and great distances make the region especially vulnerable to the combined onslaught of snow and wind. The winter of 1948-49 was particularly memorable because a series of storms between November and February paralyzed a large area of the northern Plains, including the northern third of Nebraska. Between storms the persistent threat of high winds drifting newly opened roads shut again was as great a worry as prospect of more snow.

Following the normal pattern, local, county, and state authorities handled road clearing early in the winter, but in the wake of a massive blizzard on January 2-5, it became evident that Nebraska and other states would need large-scale federal assistance. Timely, well-coordinated aid, coordinated by the Fifth Army and the Army Corps of Engineers, would prove essential in averting disaster.

The winter of 1948-49, illustrating as it does the climatic extremes of the Great Plains, is an important episode in the region's history. Great weather events, especially those covering extensive areas, become landmarks in a people's perception of their past. "The Winter of the Deep Snow" of 1830-31 was such an event for early settlers in parts of Indiana and Illinois. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Long Winter* and the climax of O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* commemorate the winter of 1880-81 on the northern Plains. The blizzard of January 1888 has endured in the lore of the Great Plains, and the blizzard of March 1888 left a similar impression on the northeastern United States.²

A massive snowdrift, higher than the farmhouse eaves and 150 feet long, almost obscures the Ernest Kiel home near Lewellen, Garden County, January 5, 1949.
NSHS-RG3139-50

Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska

Although images of nature's rigors are basic to how Nebraskans understand the pioneer experience, the lore of climatic excesses, unlike other pioneer icons, continues to accumulate. Persons born in this region in the 1930s undoubtedly heard family stories of blowing dust, the bitter cold winter, and blazing hot summer of 1936 long before they read about the Dust Bowl. More recently, Omaha residents whose memories go back to 1975 will always associate that year with the great January blizzard and the devastating May tornado. For Nebraskans and others who endured the winter storms in 1948-49, the experience stands out boldly.

Beyond the twenty- and thirty-foot snowdrifts, stalled trains, and dramatic details of the relief activity, however, is another story that is, perhaps, more important. Because repeated storms in this long winter severely disrupted normal patterns of life over much of Nebraska and neighboring states, the disruptions become a path to understanding some aspects of routine life in the mid-twentieth century. The winter's brunt fell upon an area with no large cities and few large towns; hence, the insights gained from this wide-area disruption relate primarily to rural life. From the vantage point of some fifty years later, an examination of the effects of the winter of 1948-49 permits us to draw some conclusions about key changes in Nebraska in the second half of the twentieth century.

As the third week of November 1948 began, Nebraska continued to have pleasant weather with high temperatures ranging from the 50s to the 70s. Tuesday, November 16, was a bit cooler, but the next morning an *Omaha World-Herald* headline asserted, "Weather to Stay Fair, Warmer," and the story observed, "Nebraskans will have difficulty reconciling the weather with the calendar." Yet on Wednesday afternoon, Sidney in the southern Panhandle had thunder, lightning, rain, and sleet, soon followed by snow. Strong winds caused considerable drifting through

the night. By the next morning, U.S. Highway 30, then Nebraska's principal east-west road, was closed east of Sidney. Even so, the state forecast on Thursday morning read: "Cloudy, few showers south-east, snow flurries in northeast, then clearing; colder; highs near 40." Perhaps more germane was the U.S. Weather Bureau's map which showed a low-pressure system over Colorado. The Panhandle proved to be on the edge of a storm that would have

afternoon, Harry Page and two other men came to the school and arranged to lead youngsters and Margaret Pruss to the Page home, some one-half mile to the east. Before setting out, Page stressed the importance of staying together:

So we got in line—Mr. Page, the three children, myself, [and] the other two men. Mr. Page had brought a rope with him; he had



On November 18-19 the first storm of the 1948-49 winter almost buried the H. R. Holcomb home near Chambers, Holt County. Enlarged by subsequent storms, the drifts persisted through April 1949. NSHS-RG3139-72

its greatest impact in an area from southwestern to northeastern Nebraska on Thursday and Friday, November 18-19.

At O'Neill, young Margaret Pruss, teacher at the Bredehoeft School some four miles from town, arose on Thursday morning to what she remembered as a "very damp and cloudy" day. As she left home, she yielded to her mother's insistence that she take her boots. By 8:00 A.M. it was snowing at her school and only three children were present. "By 9:00, the snow was so heavy it was impossible to see out the windows." At noon she advised the youngsters to save some of their lunches for later and she brought extra coal from the school basement to feed the stove through the night. However, that

each take hold of the rope so we could stay together. Mr. Page got us to his house safely. The storm was so fierce; we could barely see the person in front.

Not until the evening of Monday, November 22, would Margaret Pruss make it home. In the meantime, in an era when not all rural residents had telephones, her mother could only discover "that I might be at the Page home."³

On Thursday morning, Dr. Wesley C. Meierhenry of the Teachers College, University of Nebraska, set out from Lincoln for Newman Grove, where he would teach an extension class. Lincoln's weather was so mild that he did not wear an overcoat or take any

other winter clothing. At Humphrey, he encountered the storm front, but he got to Newman Grove and proceeded with his class. However, after 7:30 that evening, the electricity went off, and contrary to the advice of local people, Meierhenry set out for Lincoln. Driving a short distance south was no problem, but when he turned east, the absence of visibility forced him to open his window to watch the road. Making it to Lindsay, he made the mistake of pressing on through the rolling country toward Humphrey, but atop one hill, amid snow and winds exceeding seventy-five miles per hour, his car went off the road and bogged down in mud. Meierhenry made two treks from his car in search of aid before he saw that he would have to spend the night in his vehicle. His resources for warmth included mimeographed class materials that he used to create a barrier between his body and his wet clothing, and his auto's gasoline

supply, which lasted until around 10:00 A.M. Friday. The storm still raging, he used some of his audiovisual instructional equipment to make a head cover that would prevent his eyes from icing shut as he walked in search of shelter. He followed fenceposts until he saw a branch power line that led him to a farm home and safety.⁴

At Burwell, the storm intensified on Thursday and reached its peak on Friday. Snowdrifts of six to eight feet and higher paralyzed the town, which would be without mail or bus service until the following Monday. One person on a nearby farm estimated the wind at fifty to seventy miles per hour and said:

You couldn't see 50 feet—it was just blank white. The snow stuck to all sides of the buildings 3 and 4 inches thick, and over the windows and into woven wire fences, which made them look like stone walls.

Burwell had its own electric plant and had few power outages, but Albion, sixty-five miles east, would be without electricity for some fifty-five hours after utility poles east of town were toppled following an apparent lightning strike on Thursday evening. Many Albion residents whose furnaces were electrically governed took refuge with neighbors whose home heating did not rely upon power service. Other Nebraska communities experienced power failures because of the ice, wind, and heavy, wet snow.

When the storm abated at Spalding on Friday afternoon, it left drifts of up to twelve feet. Because of blocked roads, milk sales on Saturday were restricted to people with infants. To the west, at Sargent, the editor of the *Sargent Leader*, G. E. Livermore, who had been a resident of the area since 1883, wrote, "This storm was one of the worst the writer has ever seen here."



Opening roads drifted shut in the November storm, like this one near the H. R. Holcomb farm, was a huge task, but only the beginning of a long winter's work. NSHS-RG3139-71

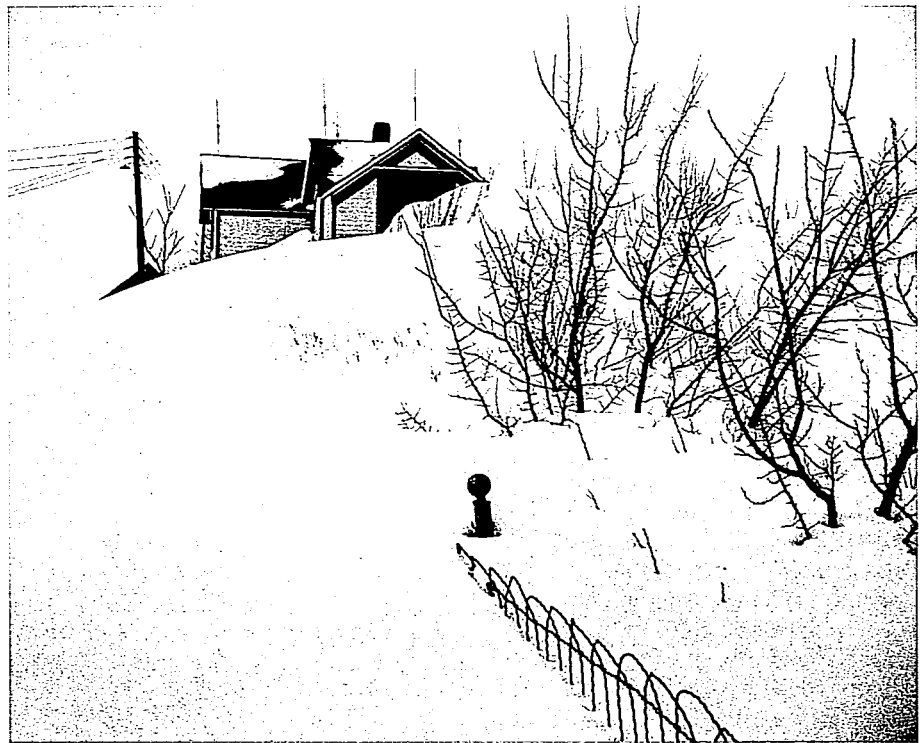
Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska

McCook, the principal town in southwestern Nebraska and a division point on the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, saw train service come to a halt. The storm was particularly hard on the railroad's centralized traffic control system. McCook was without long distance telephone service as were some one hundred other Nebraska towns, and the storm disrupted Western Union telegraph service. For two days the *McCook Daily Gazette* was without its wire service and had to rely on news-casts from radio stations around the region for some material. Greeley, a county seat in central Nebraska, was physically cut off from the outside when a large cut through which the rail line and highway entered the town from the east was filled with snow.

In the storm-stricken areas of Nebraska, hotels were filled with motorists; other people on the road were fortunate to reach farmhouses or other shelter. At Lexington, which was without electricity for over thirty hours and had no water service during part of this time, some one hundred travelers found shelter in a hotel built for sixty persons. However, the situation was worse in western Kansas, where snowdrifts stranded hundreds of highway travelers and passenger trains on three lines.

Six Nebraskans died as a result of what some elderly residents compared to the famed blizzard of January 12, 1888. Others, perhaps more accurately, concluded that it was the worst November storm in the state's history. The Weather Bureau described the storm as "one of the most severe blizzards of record over much of the central and northeastern portions of the State." Between Thursday, November 18, and Saturday, November 20, McCook received eleven and three-quarters inches of snow, and snowfall elsewhere in south-central and southwestern Nebraska ranged from six to nine inches.

Albion received twenty inches, but the most snow came in the Bloomfield-Hartington area in the northeast, where twenty to twenty-four inches fell. Totals



Although outside the main path of the storm, high winds left the Louis Vap farm, near Glenville, Clay County, locked in a frozen sea of drifts. NSHS-RG3139-57

fell off rapidly beyond the main path of the storm; for example, on November 19 Atkinson, in north-central Nebraska, had sixteen inches of snow, but thirty-one miles west, Bassett received some four inches. Ainsworth, seventeen miles west of Bassett, had only a trace of snow for the entire month. The storm brought a ten-inch snowfall to Fremont, but Omaha, thirty-six miles to the southeast, had heavy rain followed by sleet and two inches of snow. Lincoln had three inches of snow, while most of the precipitation in far southeastern Nebraska was rain.⁵

In the next few months, the use of aircraft for emergency services to snow-blocked farms and ranches became an absolute necessity. On Saturday, November 20, Dr. W. D. Lear of Ainsworth, just beyond the storm area, was called to attend Mrs. J. E. McCarthy who had been in labor for at least thirty hours. Although drifts blocked roads to the McCarthy home northwest of Burwell,

Lear learned that a nearby pasture was clear enough for a plane to land. George Manes of the Ainsworth Air Service flew Lear and Sue Johnson, a nurse, the seventy-five miles to the makeshift landing strip. Walking from the plane to the house meant getting around drifts as high as ten feet, but the mission ended successfully. For Manes, this would be the start of a long winter's work.

In the wake of the November storm, Northwestern Bell Telephone Company had 1,750 felled poles and 5,000 wire breaks to cope with in Nebraska. McCook Public Power District linemen worked from the afternoon of November 18 until the evening of November 20 making repairs, and the district had to secure additional help from a rural electrification construction crew. In north-central Nebraska, opening roads was a major task, and some areas went without mail for many days.

As the storm continued its diagonal path, it struck a heavy blow at southeast-

ern South Dakota, northwestern Iowa, and southwestern Minnesota. When it moved over the Lake Superior region, winds at Duluth broke the steel mooring cables securing the excursion ship *S.S. Wayne* and drove the vessel into a coal dock a half-mile away. The *Robert Hobson*, an 11,900-ton ore carrier, was run aground at the Wisconsin entrance into the port of Duluth-Superior.

Relatively mild temperatures during and after the storm abated the human suffering and kept livestock losses low. Although there were some significant turkey losses, the snow probably helped winter wheat crops, particularly in southwestern Nebraska, which had experienced a dry autumn.⁶

Although the first few days of December were very mild, more seasonal conditions returned on the fifth and sixth. The cold winds, which snapped this warm spell, brought "blinding dust" to the High Plains around Sidney. Winds bringing a cold wave on December 19 and 20 caused more blowing soil and damage to the wheat crop in the Panhandle and southwestern part of the state. Residents of Sidney, buffeted by sixty-mile-per-hour winds, called it the worst dust storm since the famed Dust Bowl days of 1934.⁷

As Christmas approached, the forecast called for snow, and on December 23 and 24, three to sixteen inches fell across the state. In general the winds were not strong, and the precipitation caused few problems, though travel was restricted in some areas of the Panhandle. There, the snow was a blessing for the dry land and wind-ravaged wheat.

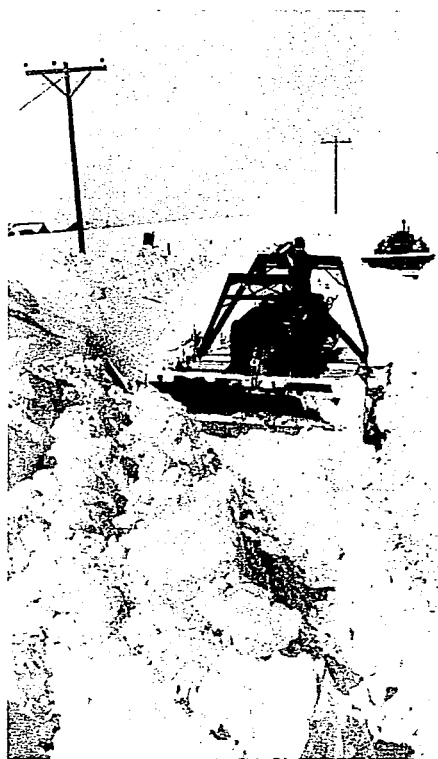
On December 28 freezing drizzle followed by "moderate to heavy snow," and winds of forty to fifty miles per hour moved across Nebraska, again from southwest to northeast. This storm was far less damaging than that of November 18 and 19, but drifts clogged roads and many telephone and telegraph lines went out of operation. There were some electrical service outages, and the *Kearney Daily Hub* could not go to press.

The two late December storms left

the deepest snow in the northern third of the state. Although Bassett received twelve inches, southern portions of Rock County had upwards of two feet.⁸

O'Neill was covered with eighteen inches, and the *Holt County Independent* declared:

It will be some time before roads are open again here, and some had just been opened after the Nov. 18th storm. Mail carriers will be unable to make their routes for sometime [sic] until the roads can be opened.



Two bulldozers from Council Bluffs, Iowa, clear roads near McLean in Pierce County. Northeastern Nebraska bore the brunt of the November storm. Courtesy Neil Becker, Omaha

In northeastern Nebraska, drifting proved to be almost as troublesome as in November. By contrast, at Chadron in northwestern Nebraska, the editor of the *Chadron Record* exclaimed, "Good old Chadron! We've again missed the second big blizzard in the state."

On Saturday, New Year's Day, 1949, the forecast called for light snow starting in the west, and reaching most of eastern Nebraska by evening. The "experimental," five-day forecast predicted "moderate" snowfall over most of the state. By Sunday, January 2, little had changed and the *World Herald's* daily forecast read: "Cloudy with light snow east, little change in temperatures. Highs 25–30." In northwestern Nebraska, Caroline Moody and her five children got in their car to drive twelve miles south to church in Crawford. Her daughter, Jeanette, would remember that ride, saying, "Mother looked often at the western sky, mumbling that it looked like a severe storm was coming. About half way to town, she uttered a moan and turned back toward home."

To the east, the town of Gordon experienced "almost spring like" weather that morning, according to the *Gordon Journal*, and, as Richmond Case recalled, "There was no hint of an approaching storm." After church, Case and his wife, Lois, drove his aunt and uncle to Chadron for "a leisurely late lunch" at a restaurant.

In the meantime, snow driven by strong gusts of wind out of the northwest, had reached the Harrison area late in the morning and by late afternoon hit Sidney. As the Case family dined, "light skiffs of snow with lots of wind" reached Chadron, and as they got ready to go home, Case's aunt suggested that they spend the night there. But the Cases were anxious to get back to their children, who were with their grandparents, and they began what would ordinarily be an hour's drive. This time it took three hours. Case said,

By the time we reached Hay Springs, a distance of 30 miles, it is dark, snowing heavily and blowing like crazy. You can't see beyond the hood of the car. I suggest to Lois that we pull off at Hay Springs and stay the night. She says no because of the children. Fortunately we had filled with gas prior to leaving

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Ray Mickels and his sons Gene and Donald of rural Madrid, Perkins County, digging their chicken house out of a drift, January 7, 1949. NSHS-RG3139-7

Chadron. I put the car in second gear and we press on.

Lois looks out the lower right hand corner of the windshield and I the lower left hand corner for the ditch. We meet no one and we pass no one. Had there been a car stalled in the roadway, I would probably [have] collided for there was no vision. I had been over the road many times and so could approximate where we were. The car was driven in second gear because I would hit snow drifts that I didn't know existed and didn't want to lose my power or momentum. So far as I can determine, we were the last car into Gordon.

By evening the storm was hitting Thedford, Burwell, and Springview in the north-central part of the state. As night fell, the snow grew heavier and the wind stronger. At Sidney, where the high temperature Sunday afternoon had been thirty-two degrees, the thermometer fell to minus three during the night, and the wind reached forty-eight miles per hour.

More than forty years later Art Henrickson, editor and publisher of the *Western Nebraska Observer*, clearly

recalled the details of his eight-block walk to the newspaper office in Kimball on Monday morning:

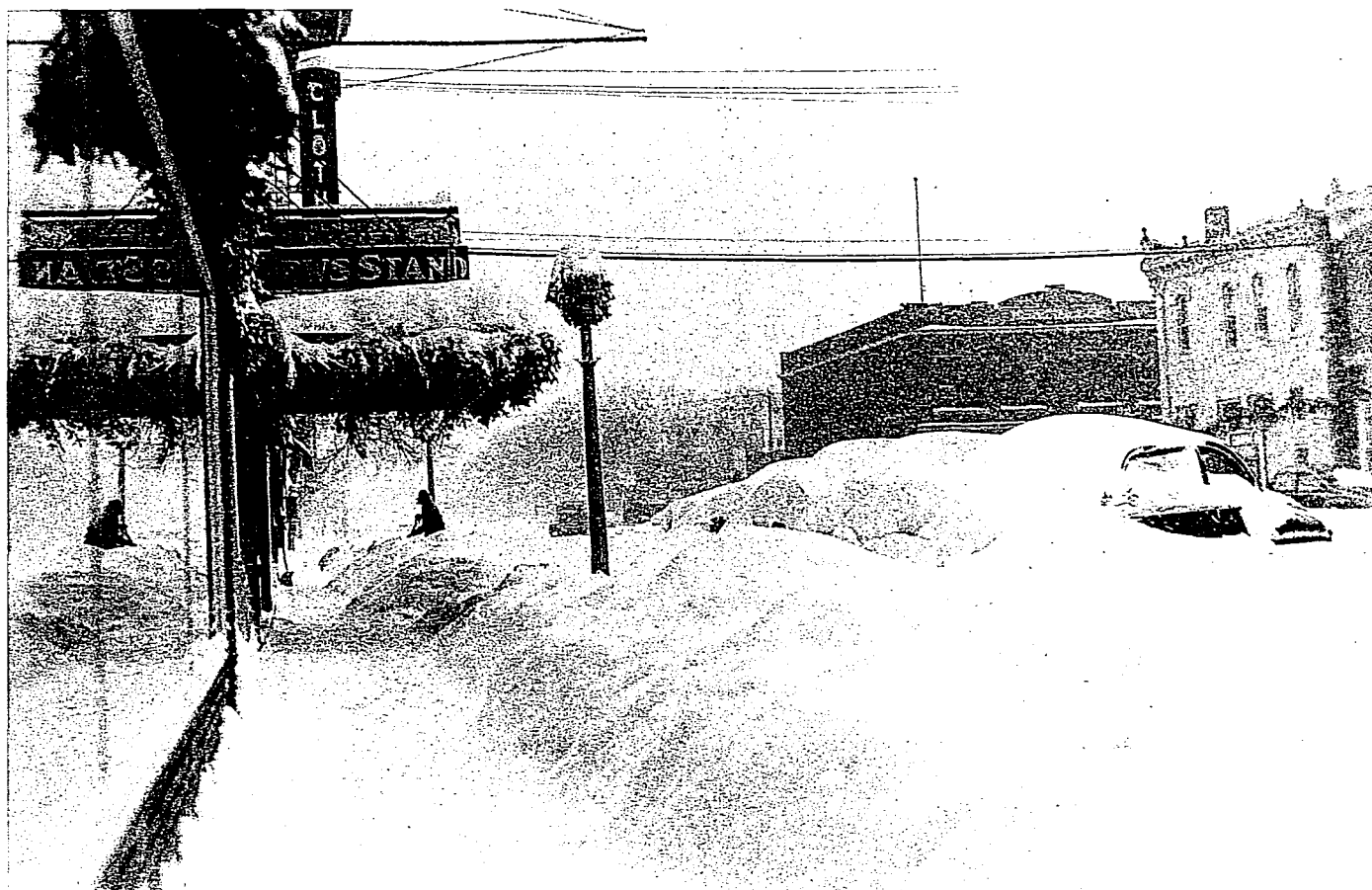
It was impossible to see or drive, so I put on my old World War II great coat, flying helmet goggles and oxygen mask with about a foot of the flexible tubing that would have connected to an oxygen tank, which I didn't have. But the oxygen mask and tube, tucked inside my coat, allowed me to breathe despite the wind and snow.

On Monday morning, as the blizzard raged, Gordon high school junior Robert Buchan trudged off to class, walking backward much of the way to keep his back to the wind. At the school he found a sign: "No school today." The homeward trek, with the wind, was much easier. "School closings were almost unknown in town in those days," he recalled, but "that day stretched into more than a week of extra vacation."

At Albion on Monday, rain and sleet heralded the blizzard. By then it was clear that western, central, and northern Nebraska were being pounded by what the Rushville paper later called a "genuine ring-tailed howler." The fore-



Three joints of stovepipe stood on the roof of the brooder house on the Herman Boerger ranch near Rose, Rock County, but on January 30, 1949, only part of the topmost joint was visible above the snow. NSHS-RG3139-31



Missed by the November and December storms, Chadron was buried under forty-one inches of snow on January 4, 1949. NSHS-RG3139-26

cast called for a blizzard, cold wave, and fifty-mile-per-hour winds, but the storm missed the area southeast of Norfolk.

The storm continued through Wednesday, January 5, lasting from forty-eight to seventy-two hours in many areas, and making it one of the worst winter storms in the state's history. At Harrison the low on Monday was minus eleven degrees; on Tuesday the estimated average wind velocity was fifty-five miles per hour with gusts to sixty-five or seventy.

After the first night of the storm, the Cerny family near Rushville discovered the storm had "wrecked" their windmill. The same thing happened on the Ed Gloy farm near Grant. Northwest of Burwell, near Rose, only the chimney of the Walter Peters home, twenty-two feet

high at the ridge, was showing above the snow by January 3. Fortunately, they had a shovel inside. In Sidney, drifts covered parking meters, and a snow bank in front of the Fox Theatre reached the marquee. At Mullen and Thedford, drifts were "as high as houses," but some places the blizzard behaved differently, leaving the ground "blown clear." Gordon's Main Street, running north and south, illustrates the latter. As Robert Buchan wrote,

When the storm was over the east sidewalk on Main Street was blown clear. This was used for several days as a road for tractors to move groceries and milk to town residents. Strategic cuts and tunnels

were dug through the high drifts on the west side of Main to bring in needed supplies.

The snow was very dry and granular, and the high winds packed it solid, greatly hindering the clearance of highways and rail lines. In places drifts were so solid that livestock could walk over fences.⁹

At Alliance, where sixteen inches of snow remained on the ground from the pre-Christmas storm, the January 2 blizzard brought an additional twenty-plus inches and left drifts up to fifteen feet high. The *Times-Herald* said, "Only a few brave souls walked to town Monday and Tuesday and it was an arduous task. Usually two or three would go together

Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska

and it was not uncommon to see several men roped together." The wind prevented accurate measurement of the snowfall, but minimum estimates ranged from ten to eighteen inches.

Ainsworth may have received upwards of twenty-five inches, but the apparent maximum was forty inches or more at "Good old Chadron." Some two hundred miles to the southeast, at Grant near the southern edge of the area most affected by the storm, drifts up to fifteen feet blocked storefronts. The moisture content of the blizzard at Grant was six-tenths of an inch.

Throughout the storm area drifts blocked house doors, and people could only get out through windows. Another problem was snow blown into attics and farm and ranch outbuildings. Scott Hardin and his wife, visiting Gordon more than a week after the storm ended, reported spending hours shoveling snow from their attic down a trap door and hauling it outside. Although one person recalled that snow blowing into upstairs parts of houses was a typical winter event, in 1949 some people failed to clear their attics promptly, and when heat from the house melted the snow, runoff water damaged plaster and wallpaper.¹⁰

The blizzard of January 2-5, 1949, occurred when a low-pressure system moved eastward from Colorado to Oklahoma and then northward to Kansas. As one meteorologist later said, an inverted trough—known even in 1949 to be "big weather-makers"—extended northward from Kansas through the Dakotas and an upper air area of low pressure may have contributed to a slowly evolving weather system.¹¹

The surface low-pressure system in the southern High Plains permitted the northward flow of moisture from the Gulf of Mexico, while an Arctic cold front advanced southward from Canada. The cold front subsequently stalled and high winds continued. By late on Monday, January 5, the low-pressure area that had been in the southern High Plains had moved northward to northeastern

Nebraska. The storm ended when this surface low continued northward, probably detached from an upper atmosphere low that was possibly over Wyoming.¹²

The storm had caught many Nebraskans off guard, and the *Alliance Times and Herald* excoriated the United States Weather Bureau for having failed to give warning:

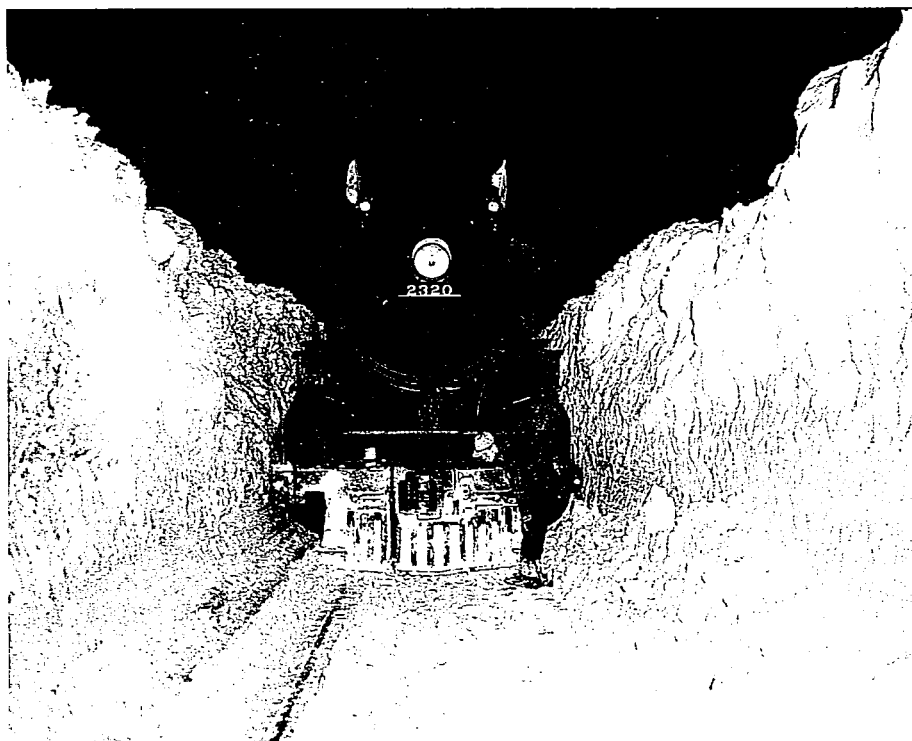
Even the small barometers around town started dropping from 10 to 20 hours in advance of the Sunday night storm, yet the government's multi-million-dollar tools were as silent as the radar instruments before the Pearl Harbor debacle.

The skipper of a 15-foot yawl could give better weather forecasts than we get in the range country.

In Nebraska, rail and highway traffic northwest of a diagonal line from McCook, which received a glancing blow from the blizzard, to the northeastern

part of the state came to a halt by the first day of the storm. Similar conditions prevailed in areas of South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Colorado. Schools could not reopen after the Christmas holiday, and many businesses were closed. At Seneca, on the Burlington line between Grand Island and Alliance, and along the Union Pacific at such places as Columbus, North Platte, Sidney, Dix, and Kimball, townspeople did much to ease the plight of stranded rail travelers.¹³

The plight of the Union Pacific's westbound *City of San Francisco*, with 270 passengers, is especially interesting. The train reached the western outskirts of Kimball on Monday morning amid heavy snow, winds gusting to sixty miles per hour with a visibility of about thirty feet, and a temperature later reported as having been minus four degrees. The engineer of the two-unit diesel-powered train concluded that he should not



A lone snow shoveler is dwarfed by a massive Chicago and North Western locomotive, its flanks scoring the high walls of snow thrown up on either side. Near Chadron, Dawes County. NSHS-RG3139-28

proceed, and around 11:00 A.M. he backed to what he accurately estimated to be the site of the Kimball depot.

Just before noon, Art Henrickson at the *Western Nebraska Observer* received a phone call from *Life* magazine, asking about a report that the *City of San Francisco* had left Kimball but had not made the next twenty miles to Pine Bluffs, Wyoming. Henrickson battled his way to the depot, and found a passenger train near the north side of the building. Station personnel did not know the *City of San Francisco* was there.

Returning to his office, Henrickson called *Life* magazine, which requested that he provide photos of the snow-bound train and its passengers. Henrickson went aboard the train and, as he remembered, "One old guy wouldn't tell me his name, but he took me in tow and was introducing me to people and having me get pictures of them."

The *City of San Francisco* remained in Kimball for the duration of the storm. On Monday night the train became ever colder as steam lines froze and the heating system failed. A steam engine arrived from Sidney on Tuesday to provide heat for the *City of San Francisco*. It, too, soon froze, and no one could stay on the train. With the help the train crew, Henrickson, and other townspeople, the passengers were taken to the Kimball Hotel and the Wheat Growers Hotel. They slept wherever they could, a day-night shift system governing the use of hotel beds. The dining car staff put the closed hotel dining room back in operation, while the Kimball Cafe did round-the-clock business. Some passengers stayed at the Servicemen's Center and in private homes, and seven of them joined in renting a house.

On the evening of January 5 a passenger, A. Perry Osborn, first vice president of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, reportedly phoned his secretary and complained that the train crew had essentially left the passengers to fend for themselves. Osborn was especially anxious because

he could not secure an estimated arrival time in San Francisco. His secretary passed the complaint to the Union Pacific corporate headquarters in New York, which forwarded the gist of the complaint to the Omaha office of George F. Ashby, the railroad's president. Ashby himself was stranded aboard a Union Pacific train in Cheyenne, but A. J. Seitz, Union Pacific vice president of traffic, phoned Osborn in Kimball. Osborn now put a more positive light on the situation, saying that some crewmembers had been helpful, and that a passenger agent had given him useful information.

The blizzard was not the only interesting aspect of Osborn's stay in Kimball. Forty years earlier, in 1908, he had worked on an uncle's ranch near Potter and knew about a local historian, Emil Forsling, who possessed a large collection of Indian artifacts and other historical items. Osborn looked up Forsling, and used the time to view his collection. The following month, E. Roland Harriman, chairman of the Union Pacific Board of Directors, wrote to congratulate Perry Osborn saying "I have seen several of your co-passengers and some of the operating men all of whom reported to the same effect, that your common sense and initiative were of great value in the emergency." Harriman told Seitz, "I learned at first hand in San Francisco that he [Osborn] had been very helpful with the passengers and I thought it appropriate to acknowledge it."¹⁴

Toward the end of the Kimball odyssey, Art Henrickson got a better clue about *Life* magazine's interest in the story. "I went back to the depot and the old guy that had helped me line up people for pictures was sitting on the front steps. He finally told me who he was. The father of Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* and *Life*."

On the evening of Thursday, January 6, the railroad opened an alternate line across northern Colorado via Julesburg and La Salle to Laramie, Wyoming. The *City of San Francisco*, its passengers impressed with Kimball's hospitality,

was pulled eastward to continue its journey. Eleven days later, an article in *Life*, which included two pages of Hendrickson's photos, would bring national attention to the sojourn of the *City of San Francisco* in Kimball. In the meantime, on the evening of January 8, the Union Pacific had cleared its main line between Cheyenne and Sidney where drifts up to thirty feet high had been reported.¹⁵

Motorists took refuge from the blizzard as best they could. For five days, Ogallala was the western limit of travel on U.S. Highway 30, and the refuge for two to three thousand travelers. Public accommodations filled quickly, and the overflow travelers stayed in private homes. The Nelson family farm, in Banner County between Scottsbluff and Kimball, became the refuge for thirty people, some of them passengers on a bus that had stalled about a mile and a half away and had been pulled in by tractor.¹⁶

At the Sioux Ordnance Depot, some four miles north of U.S. 30 and about nine miles west of Sidney, almost a thousand people were snowbound, and the electricity had failed. Indeed, there were scant comforts for workers who lived in apartments at the depot. The dry, wind-driven snow filtered under the rafters or through crevices around windows and drifted up around windows, keeping out daylight. One depot apartment dweller, Frank Bataillon, recalled that he and his wife had been well supplied with coal and wood before the storm hit. He invited neighbors needing fuel to use his supply, and in a few days it was exhausted. Some residents used their furniture for fuel, a measure that would be repeated in at least a few other isolated rural homes in the next month. When the electricity failed, the Bataillons had made "jars of stew" of their groceries, which they refrigerated in snow banks. The road to the depot was closed for five and a half days.¹⁷

In the meantime, snowplow operators, police, volunteer firemen, local pilots, and physicians handled medical emer-

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Frank Battaillon stands on a drift almost as high as his apartment roof at the Sioux Ordinance Depot near Sidney. Nearly a thousand people were snowbound at the site, where the electricity had failed and supplies of all kinds were scarce. Fuel was in such short supply that some residents burned their furniture for warmth. Courtesy Frank Battaillon, Hamburg, Iowa

gencies. As early as January 3 local Red Cross chapters began relief assistance, and a C-47 aircraft from Lowry Field in Denver dropped supplies at the Sioux Ordinance Depot.¹⁸

In the wake of the blizzard a brief thaw, followed by more freezing temperatures, left a glaze of ice glaze on the snow, and Frank Battaillon recalled that a man was dragged some distance on the slippery surface when he grabbed a parachute bearing dropped supplies. Accordingly, depot residents stomped down an area where parcels could land and be easily retrieved.

Aircraft from Lowry Field also dropped food and blankets to the tiny community of Dix, east of Kimball, where 175 Union Pacific passengers were housed in the American Legion Hall. A state rotary plow and crews, accompanied by nineteen men organized by the Kimball Lions Club, brought food to travelers stranded at the Nelson farm. Along the way, they rescued two people who had taken refuge, without food and scant heat, in an uninhabited farmhouse.

Gordon resident Dwight Margrave's snow-clearing work suggests the means by which many people and livestock would find relief from the winter's multiple onslaughts. Margrave had worked on the building of the Alaska Highway during World War II, and he had a bulldozer. Following the blizzard, he was flown to his machine left some eighteen miles southeast of town and used it to clear a trail to Gordon, allowing rural people a brief period to reach town, purchase supplies, and return home before new drifts blocked the trail. Margrave then helped clear town streets, enabling residents to resupply their heating fuel and otherwise go about their business.

By the evening of January 7, four persons were known to have died of storm-related causes in Nebraska, and sixteen more had perished in North and South Dakota, Wyoming, and Colorado. The death of Gordon resident Harmon Holloman illustrated the peril of highway travel on the sparsely settled High

Plains. Holloman's gasoline transport truck stalled nine miles east of Harrison, and he left the vehicle, apparently intending to take refuge in a nearby haystack. His body was found short of his objective.

In the course of the exceptionally long storm, farmers and ranchers tended their livestock as best they could, but exposure to the elements might bring more than the discomfort of the moment. At his family's ranch near the western border of Cherry County, Cal Westover spent much of the first day of the storm taking care of livestock. When he returned to the house around 2:00 P.M. his wife, Irene, who, with their ten-year-old son, Joe, had helped him for a time with the outside work, noticed

His face was bleeding where it had frozen then the ice had pulled away, taking hide and all. He . . . warmed up a little and drank a cup of hot cocoa then went back out to finish taking care of the stock.

Nearly three weeks later, Westover's face was still too painful to shave.

At the Green Valley Ranch northeast of Merriman, Bob and Stan Moreland also spent the first day of the blizzard caring for livestock. That evening, Bob said,

Our wrists, Stan's in particular, had big water blisters all the way around where they had been frozen and had turned a dark purple. My face swelled up and had several large black spots which didn't help my looks. Before going to bed we put salve on our frost bites, wrapped up Stan's wrist and wondered what tomorrow had in store.¹⁹

Indeed, on this night and many to come that winter, anxiety about "what tomorrow had in store" must have been common for snowbound rural families. Recalling the midst of the blizzard at her farm home north of Crawford, Olive Raben said her husband "spent a good share of the night pacing the floor and



A cow freed from a drift on the Eldon Miller farm near Belmont, Dawes County, appears little the worse for its experience.
NSHS-RG3139-80

worrying about the cattle, which we knew would drift if they could." After the storm, preliminary assessments of animal losses in Nebraska varied from pessimistic to cautiously optimistic, but it would take time for stockmen to determine how their herds had endured.

During the blizzard and for days after it ended, people who had remained at home worried about others who had ventured out. When the storm ended,

James Moody dug his way out of his family's ranch home north of Crawford and walked along a drift to check on the poultry and milk the cows. As his trek stretched to two hours, his wife, Caroline, grew worried. "I remember," said their daughter Jeanette, then a ten-year-old, "how frightened Mother was as she walked from window to window looking for him. She asked us to bring the oil lamps and set them in the window so Dad could see his way back to the house." When he returned safely he brought word that the storm had left the chickens upset and the cows too distraught to give much milk.

Unlike the November 18–19 and December 28 storms, the January blizzard did not cause widespread damage to electrical and telecommunications lines. A new Consumers Public Power District transmission line from Norfolk to O'Neill, energized on January 2, helped sustain power service in that area. Nevertheless, stranded travelers and emergency conditions placed a heavy demand on the telephone system, and switchboard operators put in extremely long hours. Five Gordon operators stayed in the Sheridan Hotel so they could get to work. However, Grant operators could not get to work, and Ed Misterick, the phone company's local manager, stayed at the switchboard while the storm imposed idleness on most townspeople. The Crownover Telephone Company, serving the Sargent area, had struggled to keep up with the volume of calls since the November storm and, following the early January blizzard, urged its customers to keep their conversations brief.

The January 1949 blizzard quickly invited comparison with the blizzard of January 1888, even though the two storms had different characteristics: The 1888 blizzard was of much shorter duration, but brought colder temperatures than the 1949 storm. Long-time residents of Nebraska tended to conclude that the blizzard of 1949 equaled or exceeded that of 1888 in its overall impact, if not short-term ferocity.

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A rotary plow and two locomotives on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy line between Sioux City and O'Neill fill the air with plumes of snow, smoke, and steam. Photo by H. O. Smith, McLean, Nebr. Courtesy Neil Becker, Omaha.

At North Platte, where the airport weather station measured 16.6 inches of snowfall for January 2-5 and an average wind velocity of 41.2 miles per hour on January 3, the meteorologist declared, "This blizzard was perhaps the severest on record at North Platte except for temperatures. There have been a few others more severe but they did not last near so long." Gene Hall, a Box Butte County cattleman who had lived in western Nebraska since 1878, and rancher James Blundell, who had lived in Dawes County for fifty-six years, said that they could recall no blizzard that equaled the severity of the January 1949 storm.

Although the Burlington and Rock Island railroads soon reopened their Lincoln to Denver lines, and the Union Pacific rerouted trains briefly through Colorado to avoid the blockage between Sidney and Cheyenne, rail

lines and highways, especially in north-central and northwestern Nebraska, remained blocked. Near Ashby, in Grant County, a drift some three thousand feet long and thirty to forty feet high on the Burlington line from Lincoln to Alliance had stalled a plow pushed by two locomotives. The wall of snow collapsed, and it took four days to free the work train. Rescued from the drift fifteen feet above one of the engines was a steer that had managed to keep its nose and the end of its tail above the snow.

By January 8, the Burlington had slashed through huge drifts in the Ellsworth and Bingham area of southern Sheridan County, opening the line to Alliance. Within another three days, two rotary plows, the best type of snow-moving equipment for both railroads and highways, would open the Burlington line between Alliance and Edgemont, South Dakota. The hard-packed drifts put one of the plows out

of service near Marsland, Nebraska, but it was a big event in Edgemont when the first train in eight days followed the two plows into town on January 11:

Train 43 was made up of 12 coaches laden with mail and passengers, and was greeted somewhat like a ship lost at sea, which finally pulls into harbor.²⁰

In the meantime, January 6-8 temperatures in the blizzard area had climbed well above freezing, but a new cold snap put an ice crust on the old drifts, and additional snow on January 9 hindered clearing efforts.²¹

The Chicago and North Western line and U.S. Highway 20 were the principal links between most of Nebraska's northern counties and the outside world, and these arteries took the full brunt of the blizzard. A week after the storm, northwestern Nebraska was still isolated; Mayor L. E. Morgan of Gordon pro-

claimed a state of emergency because of declining food and fuel supplies. The situation in the Gordon area was complicated by the presence of forty-seven families of migrant workers—247 people in all—from the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota, who were subsisting with meager shelter and provisions.²²

On January 11, two days after Mayor Morgan's proclamation, Highway 20 from Gordon east was opened. By January 13, the highway was open west nearly to Harrison. A "prairie cow trail" blazed by local highway workers using shovels and a truck fitted with a bulldozer blade gave Harrison tenuous access to the highway. Just east of Harrison, railroad crews using a wedge plow and two locomotives battled three days to break through a gigantic drift. To the east, between Merriman and Hay Springs, the North Western tracks remained blocked by thirty- to forty-foot drifts. Railroad officials concluded it was the worst traffic impediment on the line in fifty years.

The storm and its aftermath also placed an exceptional burden on the crews and equipment of the State Highway Department. County and town crews faced similar difficulties. In the Gordon area, for example, snowplow operators worked from twelve to twenty hours a day. L. E. Wolford, who worked on Highway 20, said "we run that old rotary plumb to death. The clutch went out and the front wheels almost dropped off."

Day by day, county road crews would labored to open the thousands of miles of roads that linked rural areas to towns, sometimes ignoring existing roadways to avoid drifts. Radio stations broadcast instructions to snowbound rural people for laying out ground-to-air signals indicating their need for food or medical attention. Nebraska National Guard aircraft searched for evidence of people in distress, and the Civil Air Patrol also flew relief missions.

The U.S. Air Force had authority to aid states in meeting emergencies and, pursuant to a request for assistance from



The Chicago and North Western line and State Highway 20 took the brunt of the January storms. A crew on the line near Chadron resorted to hand shovels to dig out a snowplow mired in the packed drifts. NSHS-RG3139-27

Governor Val Peterson, the Tenth Air Force created a Domestic Emergency Relief Team. On January 12, the day it was created, the team flew to Lincoln, and an "operational control board" in the Nebraska Adjutant General's office

was established to coordinate relief efforts.²³

Before or shortly after the relationship was formalized, Air Force planes from Lowry Field in Colorado began dropping supplies: hay to stock in

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Darrell Holmes of Anselmo, one of dozens of private pilots who flew relief missions, is almost swallowed up by the all-white landscape. NSHS-RG3139-102



provide transportation between towns and isolated farms or ranches. Airstrips in the blizzard area were cleared as well as possible to accommodate the small planes that dropped groceries, mail, medicine, and other necessities or flew sick and injured persons and expectant mothers to hospitals. Post offices at the isolated southern Rock County hamlets of Duff and Rose received first-class mail by air. People on a mail route in the Bassett area received telephone notification that their mail would soon be dropped. Planes also took anxious ranchers to inspect livestock, and returned ranchers stranded in town to their rural homes.²⁴

Aviators faced severe challenges. Some aircraft in the blizzard area were fitted with skis, but operating over terrain blanketed with snow was hazardous. As one Chadron flyer said after a fresh snowfall, "We risk breaking a prop every time we land and take off since this new snow came on." Indeed, in the week after the blizzard, Chadron pilots ruined five propellers.

Aviators in wheeled aircraft landed and took off from fields blown clear of snow. When snow conditions did not permit either of two ski-equipped planes to take off with a rural Rushville area woman who had broken her leg, a wheeled aircraft was brought in and a bare field served as the runway. On takeoff, men held the wings as the pilot gunned the engine. As the plane lifted off the short runway, its wheels clipped a snow bank at the end.

Tuesday, January 18, was windy. It was a bad day for flying, but a Harrison youth with a ruptured appendix had to be taken to the hospital in Alliance. As pilot Rolland Quintard prepared for takeoff, it took six men to steady his J-3 Piper Cub and keep it from overturning in the gusts. After a nearly blind takeoff and flying around three squalls, Quintard approached his destination, but he could not see the Alliance airport through heavy clouds. He had no instruments, so finding a break in the clouds, he landed on a road near town. By the



Vehicle tracks ending at drifts blocking the lane tell the story of a snowbound Greeley County farmstead. *Scotia Register* Photo, NSHS-RG3139-127

Cheyenne, Kimball, Scotts Bluff, and Sioux counties; penicillin and insulin to the druggist in Harrison; blood plasma and penicillin to Gordon; medical sup-

plies and yeast for bakers in Chadron.

As in the immediate aftermath of the blizzard, private pilots and local commercial air services continued to

end of the blizzard emergency, Quintard had flown fifty-two consecutive days, and was hospitalized for ten days for stress.²⁵

Perhaps inevitably, the storm-related flying resulted not only in daring rescues, but also in tragedy. On February 2, two men on a Civil Air Patrol flight were killed near Alliance when their plane struck a wire and crashed into a house.²⁶

Not surprisingly, immediately after the storm there was some confusion about what people in the stricken area needed. The Red Cross, for example, arranged for milk to be airlifted to towns in northwestern Nebraska, but the well-intentioned effort went awry: As one visiting newsman wrote, "Broken cans of milk clutter up every small town airfield in the sandhills." In fact, there was a brief milk shortage, but the problem was soon solved. Airdrops of other provisions also could bring unanticipated results as suggested by a report in the *Chadron Record* by Mrs. Ralph Rhoads from the Deadhorse district:

Wednesday, January 5, groceries were dropped by plane to the following ranch homes: Elam Grantham, Alfred Brecht, Nick Carter, Forrest Buchanan and Ralph Rhoads, Sr. The groceries dropped hard and fast. One bundle, the flour and powdered soap[,] got mixed and boxes of matches ignited within the box but instantly went out only to leave a sulphur taint on various produce. In spite of this[,] all ranchers were especially grateful to receive all they could.

Mrs. Rhoads later said she was unsure whether to use the mixture for baking bread or doing the washing. On the other hand, a Lisco pilot dropped a supply of fragile glass lamp chimneys to a farmer who picked them up undamaged from a snow bank.

Oddities aside, small aircraft, their pilots, support personnel, and support agencies, especially the American Red Cross, did much to prevent a serious situation from becoming far worse in



In February 1949 a Civil Air Patrol airplane delivering mail to an isolated family near Alliance hit a power line and crashed into a house, killing both men aboard. Photo by Bill O'Brian, courtesy Helen Hawley, Alliance, Nebr.



Following the January 2-5 blizzard, helicopters joined the relief effort. This one, from the Kearney Air Force Base, was stationed at the Broken Bow Airport and flew Red Cross relief missions in Custer County. NSHS-RG3139-107

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Throughout the blizzard area, road conditions forced many rural people to revert to earlier forms of transportation. Horses pulling sleighs and wagons, like this one in Anselmo, Custer County, became a common sight.
NSHS-RG3139-16

the six weeks following the January 2-5 blizzard. By early February, six private planes and an Army helicopter were handling emergency work from Bassett. From January 7 to February 17, the Red Cross sponsored daily flights from Ainsworth to look for distress signals in the snow. Often the recipients paid for the relief supplies, but the Red Cross funded the flights, and all told, the organization, working through its Brown County chapter, funded 301 hours of flying by the Ainsworth Air Service.

In this period before front-wheel-drive and four-wheel-drive vehicles were common, World-War-II-vintage Jeeps and powerful Dodge Power Wagons were most useful in confronting the tortuous travel conditions. Horses, too, helped many to cope with the severe conditions. Ranchers used horses for travel and checking livestock, and if the tractor would not start, horses drew wagons or sleds of hay to stressed livestock.

Newspapers reported farm and ranch people arriving in Hay Springs on horseback, and a few also used sleighs. In early February, horses pulling wagons and sleighs full of coal and other necessities were common on the streets of Madison, south of Norfolk near the eastern end of the snowbound country. In

the Meek area of northern Holt County, horse teams along with tractors were used to plow snow. At Crawford, the need to plow the road north to the town's cemetery allowed at least one farmer to get to town on horseback or by horse-drawn wagon.

The irony of returning to the motive power of past generations was symbolized for the *Burwell Tribune* on the bitter cold afternoon of January 22, when Arnold Garska stopped his team and wagon in front of the newspaper office. Garska beckoned for *Tribune* editor C. J. Durham to come out, and when he did, Garska said, "Today I'm doing exactly what I was doing 35 years ago—driving a team and wagon through the streets of Burwell; do you think the town is going forward or backward?"

Resourcefulness and determination were essential traits in coping with the aftermath of the great blizzard. Harold George, a University of Nebraska student stranded at home in southeastern Custer County, recalled how he got back to school:

The local road south to Sumner [northeastern Dawson County] was the logical way out as it was only eleven miles, even though it wound through the hills and valleys to get

there. Dad took the tractor (a small 20-HP Ford), put chains on it, a canvas 'Heat-houser' over the hood and the operators seat for protection from the cold, two scoop shovels behind the seat, and he and I headed for town. Since we 'knew the country' we followed the ridgelines and crossed the draws only in places where the snow had blown away and only came back to the road when we got near Sumner and the road had been opened for a ways. I then got a ride with the 'Bread man' to Kearney, caught a bus to Grand Island and finally got another bus into Lincoln. The 'trail' that dad and I blazed to Sumner was used by many neighbors for three weeks (tractors only!) or more until the army came in with bulldozers and opened things up.

The need to abandon snow-clogged roads and strike out over terrain that the winds had left in more passable condition undoubtedly governed travel across the blizzard belt. As an observer in the Lone Star area near Grant remarked in the *Tribune-Sentinel*, "The men, with tractors and trucks, have opened a trail to town for needed supplies. These trails did not follow section lines, but weaved

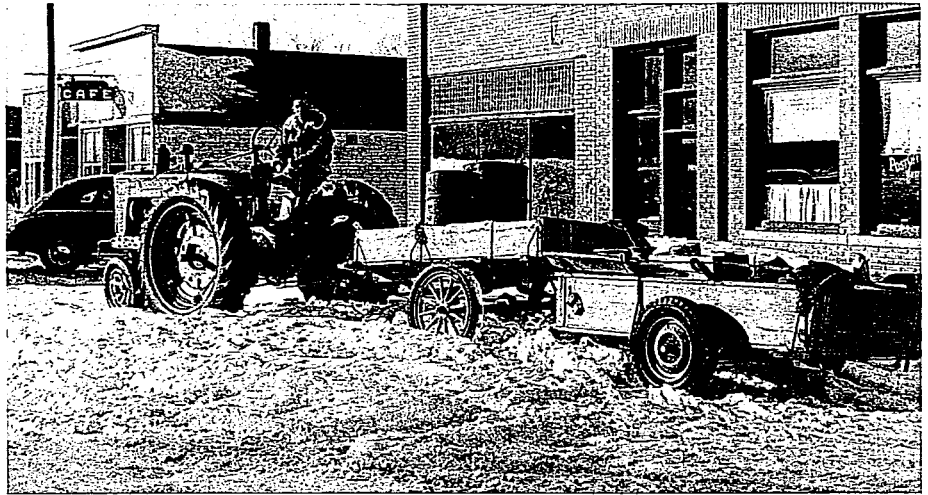
through the drifts across country to town.” Similarly, a resident of the Riverview area in the Niobrara River country wrote in the *Rock County Leader*, “Travel has been through alfalfa fields, feed lots or any place where a trail could be made.”

About three weeks after the end of the big January storm, the *Burwell Tribune* reported, Leon Thompson and his wife, of rural Amelia, used an innovative method for making the thirty-mile trip south to Burwell. After arising at 4:00 A.M., feeding cattle and shoveling snow, Thompson, with another person’s help, placed his car on an “underslung”—a low-wheeled trailer used for hauling hay. Six horses pulled the underslung bearing the auto to the partly cleared Atkinson-to-Burwell highway, and the Thompsons got to town.

People quickly adapted to the prevailing conditions. Ann Van Hoff in Verdigre, Knox County, recalled that farmers with telephones received word “on the general line”—five long rings—when country roads had been opened. That was the signal to scurry to town, attend to business, and get home before the roads drifted shut again.

Wherever people could escape their white imprisonment and reach town, streets and stores became beehives of activity, especially on the weekend after the storm, when people wanted to be prepared for the possibility of more snow. The editor of the *Burwell Tribune* noted,

Quite a few farmers and ranchers managed to get to town over the week-end, and in all manner of vehicles, ranging from horseback, tractor, hayrack, wagon and buggy, with a very few managing to make it in their trucks and cars. And believe you me, those that made it in town Saturday, with the . . . blizzard scheduled for Saturday night, they made their stay in town short and sweet, —transacting what business necessary, stocking up on groceries, and [going] back home while getting there was still possible.



In 1949, four-wheel-drive vehicles were less common than today, and many rural people, as this scene in Anselmo, Custer County, suggests, used farm tractors to negotiate improvised routes to town, often pulling wagons in which to haul goods back. NSHS-RG3139-15

On Friday, January 7, Lois Tomkins noted in her diary, sleighs were common on the streets of Inman, Holt County, as rural residents came to shop, and she mentioned sleighs and sleds in several other entries as well. The *Holt County Independent* reported,

Inman’s main street resembled a Frontier town last Saturday [January 8] as several of the farmers and ranchers made their way to town for provisions, fuel oil and the mail for themselves and their neighbors. Some had not been to town for at least ten days.

There were all sorts of vehicles on the streets and the old hitching posts were sadly missed.²⁷

Perhaps the most unusual sight after the blizzard was reported in the *Chadron Record*: a farmer rolled into Alliance on a tractor, his wife astride a saddle rigged to the tractor’s hood.

In Sidney and Chadron, and probably elsewhere, people afraid of being caught short of supplies went on a grocery-buying binge that, in its lack of selectivity, was reminiscent of the World War II period. If going to town became impractical or impossible, a well-stocked pantry and a willingness to make do

with alternatives at mealtime were essential. As Irene Westover, on a ranch in Cherry County wrote on January 12,

We are out of yeast and coffee but I experimented with starter before I ran out of yeast so we are using that to bake with. Starter bread is not so hot the way I make it but it is eatable. We only drink coffee for breakfast so don’t miss that too much as long as we have tea to take its place. The old hens quit laying.

Olive Raben recalled a similar situation at her farm home north of Crawford:

We always took a pick-up load of wheat to the elevator in Chadron every fall and had it ground up for our own flour . . . I always baked my own bread, but soon ran out of yeast! So this meant biscuits, cornbread, muffins. We had our own chickens, so for a while were Ok, [with] . . . eggs and chickens to eat. But soon the chickens started freezing to death. We did not have heat in the chicken house, and an old hen can just take so much. So we ate a lot of chicken and noodles. Also, we used to butcher

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our own beef . . . We had half a beef hanging in an old enclosed windmill tower near the house. Naturally this was frozen solid. So when we needed it, my husband would go out and literally chisel off a chunk!

By the second week after the storm, it appeared that livestock losses, with some exceptions, were relatively light, but providing feed and water to snow-bound animals would become crucial. Where livestock perished or were vulnerable, coyotes feasted. Sometimes they killed calves, but they also pursued deer. In Dawes County, a longstanding effort to eliminate coyotes may have significantly reduced predation.

In February, in southern Rock County, Helen Swanson observed that the "coyotes are so thick and so hungry-looking—are afraid they'll tackle some of the calves." About the same time, a resident of the Riverview area in Keya Paha County reported coyotes "in droves." Around McCook, south of the blizzard area, the coyotes were guant, apparently because there were fewer opportunities for scavenging and predation.

The pheasant population was markedly reduced, many suffocating when they were buried in the snow or their beaks were coated with ice, and many starved in the storm and its aftermath. Sheridan County, where the Cooperative Extension Service estimated pheasant mortality at 80 percent, endured exceptional losses.²⁸ The storm-killed pheasants could be eaten if properly prepared, and a farmer who found ninety birds east of Gordon gave them away in town. Robert Buchan recalled a Jeep ride with his father and another man to a patch of wind-cleared land south of Gordon where they found 125 frozen pheasants.

The State Game Commission, sportsmen's organizations, and individuals quickly implemented programs to feed surviving pheasants, grouse, and quail. In the Valentine area, feed in paper



A curious dog surveys a buried pickup near Thedford. NSHS-RG3139-84

sacks was dropped from airplanes, and in at least one instance freight train crewmen scattered feed along the line. A baker in McCook provided bread-crumbs that were distributed from the air and by the bakery's truck drivers. Local people also provided shelled and cracked corn to McCook's airport manager who spread it by air. In Gordon, feeding pheasants became a Future Farmers of America project.

Pheasants were especially vulnerable to suffocation, but grouse were more likely to survive.²⁹ Game birds that found heavy cover and a good supply of weed seeds were fortunate, and some pheasants survived using farm buildings and grain for shelter and food. Jack Strain, district conservation officer in

Ainsworth, noted that pheasants in farm country were generally more likely to survive than were those in lake and marsh areas where drifting snow deprived the birds of cover. He told residents of the Ainsworth-Bassett-Wood Lake area whom to contact if they discovered "concentrations" of pheasants needing feed.

By January 14, Highway 20 was open west to Harrison, and the North Western Railroad had delivered a load of coal to the community. Between Wednesday, January 12, and Saturday, January 15, temperatures across the state gradually climbed above freezing, but on Saturday, as towns were filled with winter-weary rural people, a new storm with strong winds quickly moved into the Panhandle

and points east, blocking recently opened roads and stranding motorists. Harrison got significant snow, but Sidney suffered only a brief, but severe "ground blizzard."³⁰

On January 18, a new snowstorm struck parts of the Midwest. Although most of Nebraska escaped significant new accumulations, winds a cold wave undid some of the gains that had been made in opening roads and rail lines.

Even though no more heavy snow fell, the situation was discouraging. Blocked roads kept farmers away from towns, and business was poor. There was little trade in cream, eggs, and poultry, which, along with the checks that farm families received for these commodities, attested to the economic interdependence of townspeople and rural dwellers. As roads remained shut, produce literally piled up on farms. In Wheeler County, buried in fifty to sixty inches of snow, at least one family used every receptacle at hand to store cream.

About two weeks after the big January storm, the Bloomfield *Monitor* (Knox County) described how routine life had been disrupted:

Bloomfield, and probably every other town in the county, appear as deserted villages; business is at a standstill and card games here and there are about the only activity one sees.

At the Bloomfield Creamery, H. T. Boland came up with a partial answer to the problem when he obtained a war-surplus M-29 Weasel, a tracked military vehicle that could pull a cargo sled over heavy snow. "Chet" Roland, a World War II veteran who worked at the creamery, was an experienced Weasel operator, and by late January he was using the Weasel and a sled to take supplies to snowbound farms and bring produce to town. In the next few weeks, Weasels would become essential in relief efforts across the blizzard area.

Around the neighboring town of Verdigre, some farmers "refrigerated" cans of cream in snowdrifts until they could take them to town. The local co-op made occasional produce pickups and delivered supplies at farm lanes. On January 12, the LeRoy Holcomb family near Chambers in southern Holt County

loaded a sled with sixty dozen eggs and a can of cream. Cutting across fields and meadows, they picked up another sixty dozen eggs at a neighbor's home and trekked on to meet a produce truck at the highway. In early February, a pilot who flew provisions to stranded families in northeastern Nebraska reported that some farmers had up to twenty-two cases of eggs on hand.

From Clearwater, Antelope County, came a report of a farmwoman, snow-bound for four weeks, who filled all her available egg cases, and then used pails, tubs, boxes, and other containers to store the daily accumulation. When the produce truck finally arrived, they loaded fifteen hundred dozen eggs, and paid the woman \$550.

The parts of northeastern and north-central Nebraska that had borne the brunt of the November and December storms were especially burdened by the January blizzard and its aftermath. By mid-January, routine activities had been disrupted for nearly two months. Anticipating that a pilot delivering food to her family home southwest of Clearwater would take outgoing mail, Mrs. Marvin Fuller wrote to Governor Val Peterson, detailing local problems:

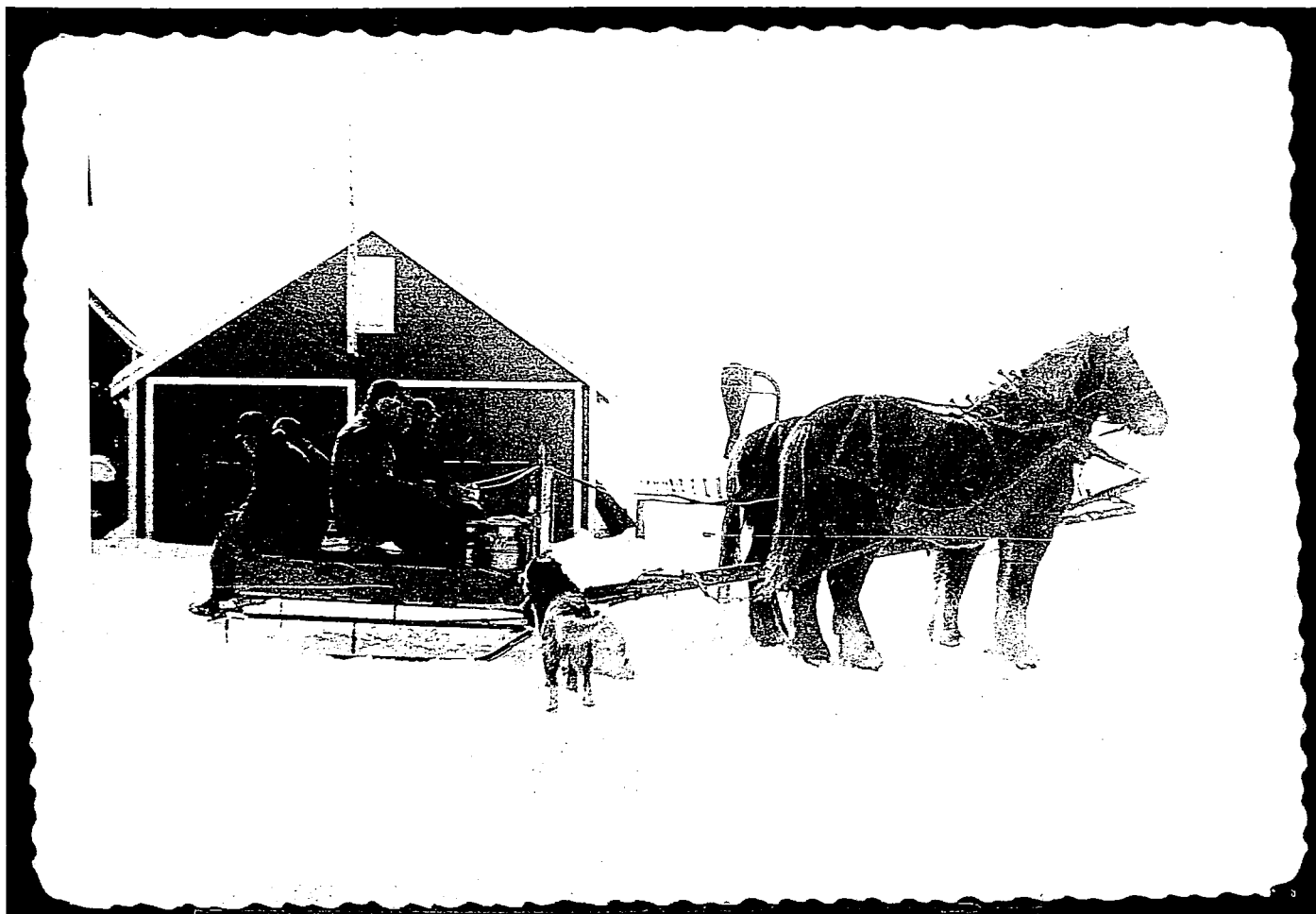
Our road . . . is the correction line & maintained by Antelope Co[unty] & has not been opened since Nov 18[.] Its getting serious[.] all the neighbors are running out of fuel. Hogs are ready for market, we borrowed corn from neighbors & that won't last long, [for] we can't get out to buy more. One neighbor is burning green wood & you know how much heat you get from that. They have 4 little children. His wife is in Clearwater with a new baby 2 wks old & he's never seen it yet.

She went on to describe how they had used a tractor-mounted plow and, aided by their neighbors with horse-drawn equipment, had cleared a road to a point where they expected to meet a road maintainer from Elgin. It never appeared, the road drifted shut again,



In Bayard, and elsewhere in the Panhandle, dust from fields blown clear by strong winds covered drifts with a dirty layer evident in this photo of Lillian Cunningham and her two brothers. Courtesy Donald Cunningham, Lincoln

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In Pierce County, the Ben Fuelberth family renovated a fifty-year-old sled and used it to haul cream and eggs to Osmond and take groceries and mail back home. NSHS-RG3139-68

and she wanted Peterson to dispatch rotary plows to the area.³¹

Then, as now, U.S. Highway 183 through the eastern Sandhills from Bassett south to Taylor was the lifeline for isolated people living off the highway on county roads. The November storm had left great drifts south of Bassett, and the snow and wind in late December thwarted efforts to keep the highway open. Bassett was a service center for this large area extending into southern Rock County, and by mid-January continuing redrifting across Highway 183 was a major problem. In the immediate aftermath of the January blizzard came word that drifts reached

housetops. Ranchers in southern Rock County hired heavy equipment from the Dunlap Construction Company—then building a road near Bassett—to open trails so they could feed livestock.

The brief blizzard that hit the afternoon of Saturday, January 15, left people stranded south of town on Highway 183 and on other roads as well. That night, a rescue party was also stranded. On Sunday a plow working southward brought relief, and private aircraft and pilots from Blair, in eastern Nebraska, flew in to check on Highway 183 travelers and provide assistance to farm and ranch residents in the area.

Although a rotary plow had done

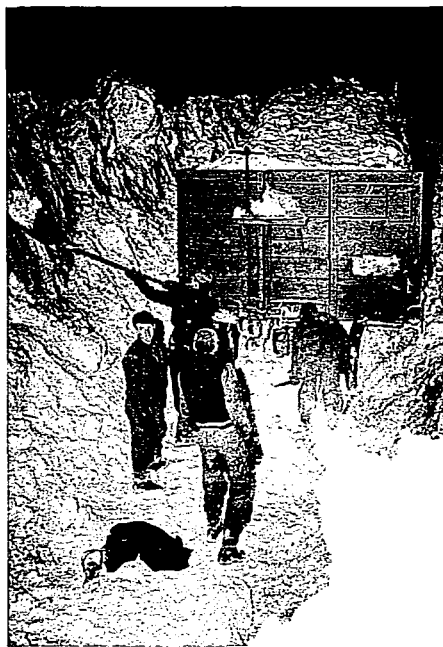
some work on Highway 183, a petition circulated in Bassett called for a plow to be stationed in the town so that mail could be distributed to rural post offices along the route. In a front-page editorial, which suggested a grievance that transcended the present winter, the *Rock County Leader* asked, "Why is it that 183 is usually one of the last to be opened in the winter when it is drifted shut?" Bassett residents Henry Canenburg, president of the Nebraska U.S. No. 183 Highway Association, and Roy H. Patitz, Rock County Republican Party chairman, informed Governor Peterson of the need to keep this road open. Although the governor replied that the state was

doing its best in allocating clearing equipment, Canenburg was not satisfied. On January 25, he told Peterson, "We are getting the run-around on Highway 183 south of Bassett," a comment that stung the governor.

The same day Canenburg wrote, a rotary plow reached Bassett and, with other equipment, began working south on U.S. 183. The following week, however, Canenburg complained, "Highway 183 north of Bassett has not been opened for weeks." The governor now seemed tired of his complaints. Tenuous travel on Highway 183 south now was possible, a situation apparently similar to that which had prevailed some two weeks earlier. Matters were slow to improve, and the *Leader* continued to discuss what it perceived as a failure of the state to meet its road maintenance obligations in Rock County. As publisher Clifford Buckendorf put it on February 10, "This county has less than 100 miles of highway and still they are blocked with the exception of about 10 miles." As he had done earlier, he contended that much more attention was being given to the highway north from Ainsworth than was being given to Highway 183.

The *Ainsworth Star-Journal* saw local highway maintenance in a different light. In late January, it reported that State Highway 7 north from Ainsworth had been given snow-clearing priority in order to open access to Norden. Except for one period of about seven hours, the highway to that Keya Paha County hamlet had been blocked continuously since December 31, and the public school's coal supply was being rationed out to residents. Moreover, the paper detailed the tremendous amount of overtime work by State Highway Department employees.

Despite the new storms, crews were beginning to make progress clearing the Chicago and North Western line across northern Nebraska. On Sunday night, January 16, they won a ten-day struggle against the drifts between Hay Springs and Rushville. At 5:45 P.M. on Monday,



Forty-one inches of snow and strong winds made opening rail lines a daunting task, taxing both men and machines.
NSHS-RG3139-25

the first North Western train since the big blizzard—only a plow and work cars—pulled into Gordon from the west, followed the next day by three cars of coal. East of Gordon, the town of Cody, population 375, in northern Cherry County, was the focal point for C&NW's attack on the drifts. As the *Sheridan County Star* reported,

The equipment strung over the tracks in this small town told the story of the perseverance and 'hardships' of these crews. Thirteen snow plows—eleven of them broken down from the 40-foot, ice-packed drifts; diesel engines, steam engines—out of oil and none available; wreckers sent in from as far away as Des Moines, . . . some of the railroad's biggest equipment, scrapers, cabooses, living quarters, cars, and numerous other pieces of equipment picked up at intervals—all gathered in these few miles of track. One trainman remarked, 'In 44 years of railroading, I've never seen so much equipment in one

spot—why it looks like the Chicago terminal.'

On January 19 the line was open to Omaha, but new drifting jeopardized movement east from Chadron, west to Casper, Wyoming, and north to Rapid City. By the end of January the line was still drifting shut, especially in northern Cherry County. One westbound passenger train reached Gordon in the week after January 27, and in the month after the January 2 blizzard, the town had rail service only on three days. As February began, a thousand freight cars were tied up at Long Pine and points east, and not till February 16 did the westbound train arrive in Gordon on time. On February 17 Harrison anticipated its first passenger train since New Year's Day.

The C&NW's woes were not limited to the northern line. After December 28 the branch between Scribner and Oakdale was at times burdened with up to seven inches of ice. Albion was without rail service from January 1 until the night of February 9, when a train pulled in from Oakdale to the north. Subsequent drifting interrupted service on this branch, and the C&NW line east from Albion remained completely closed. In its struggle to restore service, the C&NW tried everything from sophisticated power equipment to men hacking away at the ice with picks. Finally, on February 23, workers chiseled through a six-and-one-half-mile stretch linking Humphrey and Creston, and the tracks east from Albion were opened.³²

Similarly, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad line from Sioux City to O'Neill had been blocked since before New Year's Day. Wind had filled deep cuts with upwards of thirty feet of snow. On December 31, a short distance east of O'Neill, two locomotives driving a plow were almost through a drift some eighteen hundred feet long and twenty feet deep when they derailed. A work train sent from Sioux City was marooned at Page on January 3, and the arrival of the blizzard and the subsequent ice problem assured that the CB&Q snarl east of O'Neill would not soon be

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Inching down the tracks between Chadron and Whitney, Dawes County, Chicago and North Western locomotive 2320 makes slow progress behind a plow and a track-clearing crew. NSHS-RG3139-29

untangled. In early February, with the line still blocked, coal was rationed at Page.

The railroad took the unusual step of hiring a private contractor to help bulldoze the O'Neill line open. They also tried dynamite, but in one of nature's paradoxes, the drifts that were too hard-packed for railroad plows were not dense enough for explosives to be effective. Not until February 25 did a Burlington work train reach O'Neill and service to Sioux City resume. The railroad reported its labor cost for the job at about a thousand dollars per mile.³³

Burwell, a town of about fourteen hundred at the end of a Burlington branch running northwest from Aurora, had been without rail service since December 23. The line ran through hilly country where snow blocked many cuts, particularly between Greeley and Burwell, and the railroad could not deliver the fuel oil the town relied on to run its light and water plant. Fortunately, the southbound highway was open and some fuel could be brought in by truck. The railroad was essential for other bulky

necessities such as coal and livestock feed, but the CB&Q could not promise Mayor H. A. Phillips when the line would be open. On January 20, the town sought help from Governor Peterson.

A rotary plow stalled in a drift near Greeley, and a wedge plow sent to free it also stalled, marooning both work trains and at least sixty crewmembers. Not until the morning of January 31 would a rotary plow, followed by a special train carrying oil, coal, and feed, reach Burwell.³⁴

A parallel CB&Q branch running northwest from Palmer to Sargent was blocked until February 3, when four locomotives pushing a plow brought a load of coal to Sargent. Operating conditions remained difficult. On February 5 what the Sargent paper called "a near real train" pulled into town with additional coal and other goods, its two locomotives pushing a snowplow. The crew, "nearly stupid from loss of sleep," would get only eight hours off before going back to work.³⁵

South of the main blizzard area, the Burlington's "high line" from Holdrege

across southwestern Nebraska to Sterling, Colorado, was blocked, and as towns along this branch ran out of coal, they appealed to the governor to intercede with the railroad and persuade it to clear the tracks. Some believed the delay related to the railroad's effort, then underway, to gain regulatory approval for ending passenger service on the branch. The Burlington vigorously denied the accusation.³⁶

From Omaha, Samuel Fee, general manager for the CB&Q's operations west of the Missouri River, wired detailed daily reports to the governor on the status of the company's lines. On January 18, he wrote:

As of 4:00 P.M. date we have 513 miles of track in the state of Nebraska, exclusive of the Holdrege-Sterling line, blocked with snow, ice, and sand. The drifts range from four to thirty five feet deep and are so solid as to almost defy our continuous efforts to dig through them with mechanical plows. The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy owns but 3 rotary plows. We have rented one from one of our neighboring lines. All four of them have been in continuous operation day and night since January 2nd.

He also claimed that the Holdrege-Sterling line was getting special attention.³⁷

By January 20, the track was cleared to the west beyond Curtis and people along the eastern part of the line could anticipate the restoration of service.³⁸ However, two weeks later, referring to the work on a stretch of line in southwestern Nebraska, Fee noted, "The progress is slow due to the plows encountering considerable dirt frozen in the snow." As elsewhere in the storm area, cuts were especially vulnerable, and Burlington workers were shoveling them open by hand. A snowplow crewman who had been clearing tracks since 1915 said that obstruction of the "high line" was the worst in his memory.³⁹ Although no disastrous con-



After weeks without classes, most schools were open again by mid-February. At District 156 near Chambers, Holt County, February 17, 1949, returning students are (l. to r.) Nyal Rowse, Bobby Gartner, Betty Gartner, Hope Martin, Carolyn Wintermote, and Ann Mae Gartner. NSHS-RG3139-77

sequences of the fuel shortages were reported, the disruption of rail service brought delays in postal service. At last, on February 7, the line was opened all the way to Sterling.

At various times in January and early February Burlington lines south and east of the main storm area were also plagued by blocked tracks. On January 29, the CB&Q reported that twelve Nebraska branches in addition to the O'Neill, Burwell, Sargent, and Holdrege-Sterling lines were blocked.⁴⁰

By February 7 only three southern Nebraska branches remained at least partly closed, but on February 18, rotary plows were still working between Sutton and York and between Bladen and Holdrege. In late February, with all branches open, Fee said, "Nowhere in the entire 100 years of the existence of the Burlington railroad is there any record of a storm so severely intense, prolonged and widespread as we've experienced in the past three months."⁴¹

The Union Pacific also had trouble

on its branches north of the Platte River, and on the Kearney-to-Stapleton branch the amazing capacity of ice and snow to thwart the determination of men with their powerful machines spelled tragedy. On January 18, a Union Pacific train comprised of a wedge plow, two engines, a ballast car filled with rock, and a caboose was moving west in an attempt to reopen the line to Stapleton. Near Hoagland, Logan County, the train slammed into a fourteen-foot drift and derailed. The plow jackknifed into the two locomotives and a brakeman in the second engine was killed. Wind and drifting snow made the recovery of the body, the rescue of an injured crewman, and cleanup work slow and arduous.

To the east, on the Union Pacific branch from Columbus to Spalding, two blizzard-related derailments impaired or blocked operations on the upper part of the line until February 14.⁴²

The hard conditions also were dangerous for elderly rural residents. Within two days in late January, four

people died in Holt County from weather-related causes. Two of the deaths were especially poignant. At his home southwest of Atkinson, eighty-seven-year-old Lewis Slaymaker became seriously ill. It took more than a day for a twenty-person rescue group using a snowplow and shovels to reach his home. He died in the Stuart hospital some twelve hours after being rescued. A resident of the area since 1879, Slaymaker had witnessed the loss of many of his family's cattle in the blizzard of 1888.

South of O'Neill, a neighbor checking on the plight of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Kiltz discovered Mrs. Kiltz dead in the snow between the house and the barn, and her husband dead in the barn. Apparently she had become worried about his long absence and had died while looking for him.

Blocked roads kept many rural schools closed and made it difficult for students from the country to get to

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town to attend high school. Some rural students who did reach town stayed with relatives or friends, but attendance from outlying areas was down for long after the big storm. More than two weeks after the blizzard the *Harrison Sun* reported that some of the boys might have been absent because they were helping tend livestock weakened by the weather. In early February, Gertrude M. Banks, Garfield County superintendent of schools, reported,

Blizzards and no school in the rural districts in Garfield County is no longer news. Two-thirds or more of these schools have been closed the past month. The County Superintendent has been unable to even contact a number of teachers. What were once roads have no resemblance [*sic*] now as drifts of various weird shapes and sizes that are unbelievable, block these roads. . . . School boards in the majority of cases have ruled that it is neither safe for teachers or pupils to walk to school.

At least one Garfield County school remained closed for five weeks because of the weather and impassable roads.

No state law governed weather-related school closings, so the State Department of Public Instruction ruled that a statute on school closings during epidemics was applicable to the current situation. The law provided that teachers would be fully paid for the time schools were closed, and that lost instructional days would not have to be made up. However, on February 2, F. B. Decker, director of the Department of Public Instruction, announced that he had received "a number of reports that far too many teachers, board members and pupils are abusing the epidemic ruling." He declared that school boards would decide whether to make up lost time due to teacher absence, and suggested that teachers should agree to make up some of the lost days without pay.

Later, when roads were opened, Sheridan County Superintendent Jennie

Bennett suggested that some teachers were not exercising proper diligence in getting back to their schools, and noted that local boards could designate make-up days. For Margaret Pruss and her pupils who had been nearly stranded at the Bredehoeft School in Holt County during the November storm, the heart of the winter extended their Christmas holiday until February 15. Pruss recalled that County Superintendent Elja McCullough directed that rural schools would make up classes on Saturdays, and teachers would be docked half their salaries for days missed.

In fact, some rural schools functioned with varying degrees of success, and teachers provided noteworthy examples of adaptation to adversity. Irma Fodge, who taught near Alliance, gave assignments to her students by telephone. Three teachers who lived in Alliance but taught at drifted-in country school-houses, taught classes in their own homes. A farmhouse basement served as a classroom for at least two weeks for Mrs. Jack Minion and her Box Butte County District 46 pupils. Another teacher, Alice Brennehan, prepared assignments that were mailed or carried to the twenty-two students, including seven eighth graders, of Garfield County's Rosehill School.

By the third week in February, most children were back in school, and teachers were struggling "to make up for lost time." Holt County schools were especially hard-hit. Lolajean Ickes, who taught near Star, northeast of O'Neill, found the drifts around her school so formidable that she held classes in the home where she boarded.⁴³

In the same area, thirteen-year-old Alice Young (now Alice Young Compton Tomkins) whose school would not meet for six weeks, became anxious about how she would fare in the eighth grade county examination in the spring. Her teacher, Mrs. William Murphy, sent Alice extensive study materials—delivered on horseback. Toward the end of the snow-bound period, Alice had an unusual experience:

Another family was worried about their seventh and eighth grader[s] getting behind in a neighboring district. They invited their teacher along with me to come stay in their house and have school. It was so much fun having school in the living room of their house! The four of us "played" school for a week, as I recall and the road was then opened so we could get to our own school the following week. The teacher for the neighboring district was a cousin of mine, Miss Thelma Young.

A well-publicized story of such adaptation came from the remote Sandhills country midway between Ashby and Gordon. On January 19, when travel conditions closed her Happy Hollow School, the teacher, Cecilia Sandoz, had at least a partial solution. She boarded at the Cal and Irene Westover ranch, and, as Irene wrote, "Celia and [the] boys walked to school and brought the books home on the toboggan. We'll have school in the front room now." Although the Westover's supply of heating oil was running low, their home remained the school for more than three weeks.

Typically, eight of the thirteen children attended, three of them Westover youngsters and two others who resided at the Westover home during the difficult travel period. Three students made the trek to and from their home, but the remaining five lived too far away for a daily trip in those conditions. In 1954, Mari Sandoz, Cecilia's aunt, published *Winter Thunder*, a novella inspired by the episode.⁴⁴

As the teacher for Platte County District 17 in the Shell Creek Valley northwest of Platte Center near the southeastern edge of the blizzard area, Jo Eberly also experienced the severity of the winter. She boarded with a farmer and his wife not far from the school, which had twelve pupils. The telephone was basic to school operations:

The school board advised me when possible by phone. A party-

line ring would let the students know school was open. Should the phone system be out I would hike to the school, light the fuel oil heating stove and hoist the U.S. flag for anyone to see that school was on.

Eberly gave assignments by telephone, paying particular attention to reading, spelling, and mathematics. If the school's pump froze, a farmer provided a bucket of drinking water and also helped clear snow from the paths to the privies. Eberly recalled, "The students carved steps down to the necessary rooms as the snow piled deeper."

For rural schools, as with blizzard-area residents generally, heating fuel had to be conserved. At the Platte County District 17 school:

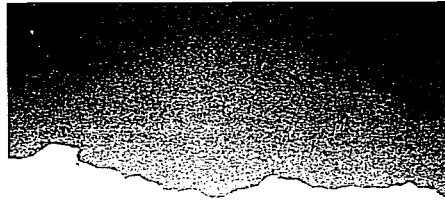
We used #3 fuel oil from a large storage tank outside the school building. We never ran out but we didn't use high heat long. We sat the smallest, younger students nearest the fire. Once the building was entirely under the drifted snow it was snug. Perhaps we had a year's worth of fuel on hand.

Coal was still commonly used for heating. When the Willow Springs School near Burwell finally opened, a shortage of coal made it necessary to dismiss children early, but they were given homework.

For rural children, the experience of being out of school for a long time must have been an especially notable memory. Linelle Tompkins (now Linelle Kelley), the eight-and-a-half-year-old daughter of Harvey and Lois Tompkins, who ranched near Inman, did not like being out of school for six weeks, but the rest of her experience was fine. For her, the winter was "a great adventure":

It was great fun to bundle up, sit on the bales of hay in the wooden sled my Dad and the hired man made, and go to town. My brother Roger and I liked to go whenever we got the chance, and it was fun to bring a friend home to stay over-

night. One time my friend Vicki Sue Hutton was snowed in a couple of days before she could go back to her home in Inman . . . More fun! Roger and I would go outside and



In spite of the disruption it caused, many children, including Jerry and Lorraine Greenwood of rural Whiteclay, Sheridan County, thought the blizzard was a grand adventure. NSHS-RG3139-36

climb on the huge drifts when it wasn't snowing. We could get on top of buildings by climbing on some of the drifts. We also made tunnels. We tagged along with Dad whenever we could. We also had a lot of family fun . . . card and board games, singing around the piano, putting jigsaw puzzles together. Roger and I also made forts in the house by putting blankets on card tables and furniture. Mother must have had lots of patience!

Of course, memories of hardship, struggle, and some tragedy dominate the composite picture of how people

experienced the winter of 1948–49 in Nebraska. Nowhere was the plight of humans in a cruel environment bleaker than around Gordon, where some three hundred snowbound Indians, most of whom had been employed in the area as migrant workers, had been subsisting on donated potatoes and frozen cattle. For fuel they burned old tires, donated railroad ties, and coal.⁴⁵

Robert Buchan, recalling the 125 pheasants that he had helped collect, said,

We took the pheasants to the Indian camp that was east of the sale barn and told them to be sure to thaw them and bleed them before they attempted to cook them. I remember that the tents were sheathed with ice, but they seemed fairly snug since they had stoves. Just before we got to the camp a local grocer, Mr. Ferd Shald, had delivered a beef to the camp and other groceries.

Their hardships became even more evident when two newborn babies died. Most of the Indians, some of whom claimed to be residents of Gordon, were living in shacks and tents, and working at whatever odd jobs they could find.⁴⁶

A Rushville area couple gave food and shelter to two families who had been picking corn at their farm when the Indians' tents and cars were buried in the snow. The *Gordon Journal* paid the medical expenses for an Indian child whose father was wary of government help at the reservation.

At Gordon, a mayor's committee and the Red Cross also aided the migrants, the Red Cross purchasing groceries from local stores for distribution to the Indian families. The expense prompted Gordon's leaders to seek help from Lincoln, the Pine Ridge Indian Agency, and Washington. Basic to such requests was the argument that Native people from the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota were not a local responsibility.⁴⁷

In the Alliance area, 225 to 250 Sioux

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A drifted road at the Lester Broadfoot ranch near Halsey, Thomas County. By mid-January as rural residents continued to struggle with drifted roads, and as food, fuel, and livestock feed supplies were exhausted, it became obvious that state and local governments could not handle the situation alone. NSHS-RG3139-87

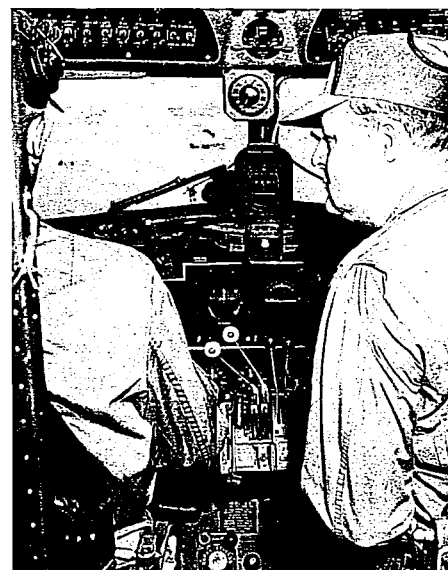
were aided by the Box Butte County Red Cross, an Alliance grocery store, and the *Alliance Times-Herald*. Local residents also contributed to the relief effort, and more help came from people in Lincoln and Illinois. In January, Box Butte County provided the meager sum of \$179.80 in relief to nineteen non-resident Native American families totaling 114 persons. A state welfare official, speaking of the general plight of Indians in Nebraska, said counties were reluctant to give them assistance.⁴⁸

Gov. Peterson and local officials appealed for federal assistance for Indian relief, as did South Dakota Governor George T. Mickelson. On January 19, the governor was advised that the Federal Works Administration would aid the migrant people. With the help of Senator Hugh Butler and other members of the Nebraska congressional delegation, arrangements were completed by the end of January for the use of federal funds for the relief of the Indians in the Alliance, Gordon, and Valentine areas. The funds were disbursed through the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations. However, Gov.

Peterson was not impressed with the extent of the aid, which he later described as "simply stinky." Senator Kenneth S. Wherry of Nebraska shared this view.⁴⁹

Joe W. Leedom, Jr., editor of the *Gordon Journal*, wrote, "Reservation lands will support but a quarter of the Oglala Sioux population." Leedom sympathized with the Indians, "America's own DPs" [displaced persons], who lacked money to provide for their needs, but in a plea for an integration of Native people into mainstream American society he hinted at white-Indian tensions in the Gordon area: "In towns less close to reservations Indians are as productive and useful citizens as any." Clearly, in the High Plains of Nebraska and South Dakota, the brutally hard winter highlighted one of the country's most durable social problems.⁵⁰

As time passed, highway and road clearing became evermore daunting. On January 20, Governor Peterson met with members of the legislature from the blizzard area and State Highway Department officials to consider possible action. The governor noted that the



On January 24, 1949, after hearing reports from the field and observing conditions by air, Gov. Peterson (right) appealed for federal help. NSHS-RG3139-114

state had two dozen rotary plows, six acquired only the previous week, working round the clock. Peterson was mindful of the additional challenge of clearing county roads, and from this meeting came the prospect of a legislative appropriation to aid county governments in this task. Adding to the sense of urgency, were alarming predictions for the livestock industry if hay were not delivered to snowbound animals.⁵¹

The last two weeks of January were very cold. Albion had fifteen consecutive days with lows of zero or below, and from eight to eleven days with lows of zero or below were common throughout and around the blizzard area. January 22-23 brought snow to western and northern Nebraska, and elsewhere freezing drizzle and freezing rain made highways treacherous and knocked out long distance telephone lines. The area from about Hastings east to Lincoln and north to Saunders County was especially hard hit. On January 27-28, freezing rain, sleet, and snow again hit the state.⁵²

"Another bad storm in progress. High winds drifting snow," Lois Tompkins wrote in her diary on January 27. At

Grant, on the southwestern edge of the blizzard area, drifting snow mixed with blowing dust, producing a muddy conglomeration. The greatest precipitation fell southeast of the area already paralyzed: Omaha had thirteen inches of snow, and Lincoln received nine and one-half inches.⁵³

The magnitude of the paralysis grew increasingly evident. On January 27, Lois Tompkins wrote, "Heard a telephone call over WNAX [Yankton] to Gov. Peterson & Gov. Mikkleson [Mickelson] of So Dak. about requesting Fifth Army help in combating the snow. Very serious." The next day, "Drifting didn't stop until about 4:00 P.M. All roads in Nebr. shut. 12" snow in Omaha. Gov. Peterson said we have to realize that there might be more snows. No transportation in Nebr. No trains. Communities should organize to ration foods."

By the fourth week in January, it was evident that some two million snow-bound cattle and sheep in Nebraska and the Dakotas westward to Nevada were in jeopardy. On January 21, the Tenth Air Force had dissolved its Domestic Emergency Relief Team, but as the weather continued to deteriorate, it was reestablished three days later. To feed stranded livestock the Air Force launched Operation Hayride, better known as Operation Haylift, using C-47 and C-82 cargo planes. Denver's Lowry Air Force Base was headquarters for Operation Haylift work in Nebraska and South Dakota. On the ground the Army was using Weasels to bring supplies and assistance to stranded people.⁵⁴

From Lincoln, Governor Peterson asked county boards of commissioners how they were coping with storm recovery. In response, he received many telegrams saying that county governments lacked the money and equipment to open roads; deep snow and drifts kept cattle from getting to feed; and, in some cases, long-isolated rural people were exhausting food and fuel supplies.⁵⁵

It was obvious that more equipment was needed to open the thousands of miles of county roads, and on January 24



This *Omaha World-Herald* cartoon, titled "Another Pick Plan," plays on the ice picks used by soldiers attacking the blizzard monster, and alludes to the appointment of Maj. Gen. Lewis A. Pick as commander of the Fifth Army's Disaster Force Snowbound. Pick had earlier proposed a plan for development of Missouri River dams, later modified and adopted as the Pick-Sloan Plan. *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 1, 1949

the governor appealed to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Fifth Army for aid. He also sought help from Federal Works Administrator General Philip Fleming. The next day, following a meeting with Peterson, the budget committee of the legislature offered bills to appropriate \$500,000 for road clearing and other storm-related work and to

give administrative responsibility to the Adjutant General. With procedural rules suspended, the bills passed unanimously. The Governor declared a state of emergency in all of twenty-two counties and parts of seven counties in northern Nebraska. Under the direction of Brigadier General Guy N. Henninger the adjutant general, a command post

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for "Operation Snowbound" relief activities was set up in the basement of the capitol building.

Governor Peterson also asked President Harry S. Truman for federal funds to match the state storm relief appropriation. The president quickly committed money to western storm relief, and at his request, Congress approved additional federal aid. Truman had implicitly rejected a matching funds approach, but as he later told Peterson, federal resources would be available through the duration of the crisis.⁵⁶

In the meantime, on January 27, as another big storm continued in Nebraska, Basil O'Connor, president of the American Red Cross, notified Val Peterson and the governors of seven other western states that the ARC had funds for relief in the winter-stricken region.⁵⁷ The same day Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas, deputy commander of the Fifth Army, met with Governor Peterson in Lincoln to consider the role of the Fifth Army in Nebraska.

To emphasize the urgency of the situation, the governor used figures compiled by Rufus Howard, Nebraska director of agriculture, who estimated that in the twenty-nine counties wholly or partly in the storm emergency area, there were 1,684,440 cattle worth \$252,660,000 or about \$1.95 billion in 2003 dollars, according to the online calculator maintained by the Federal Bank of Minneapolis ("What is a Dollar Worth?," <<http://woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/Research/data/us/calc/index.cfm#calc>> Dec. 21, 2002. All subsequent conversions of 1949 dollar amounts to their 2003 equivalents were made using this calculator.) If sheep and hogs were added, along with livestock in areas on the periphery of the storm-stricken territory, the value of livestock possibly in jeopardy was much higher.

Fifth Army bulldozers, Weasels, and "Sno-gos" (four-wheel-drive trucks equipped with separately powered augurs) were already at work, and General Lucas recommended that the

Army assume control of relief efforts. The Fifth Army was willing to do what it could, but such a costly task needed higher authorization.⁵⁸

On January 28, a group of senators and representatives from Nebraska and other affected states sought unsuccessfully to meet with President Truman to plead for an Army takeover of relief activities. The request was denied, but a



Operation Snowbound quickly became the world's largest bulldozer operation, surpassing even Gen. Pick's Ledo Road operation from India to China during World War II. *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 4, 1949

White House spokesperson said that the president was awaiting a report from his blizzard relief coordinator, General Fleming. Clearly, many people in the West were not pleased with Washington's response. That day, an *Omaha World-Herald* editorial said, "Now that Nebraska is desperately in need of outside help, there is an astonishing lethargy on the part of the Federal authorities—or at the very least, there is failure to appreciate the enormity of the disaster."

The next day, Saturday, January 29, President Truman dispelled doubts about his intentions when he directed the secretary of defense to ren-

der "all possible aid in the disaster area," a commitment that formalized the crucial role of the military.⁵⁹

At 11:00 A.M. Maj. Gen. Lewis A. Pick, Missouri River Division engineer, Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha, received command of the Fifth Army's Disaster Force Snowbound. During World War II, General Pick had been in charge of the construction of the Ledo Road from India to China. After the war, his leading role in Missouri River dam building gave him a working relationship with civilian contractors who had the equipment needed to plow the snow-clogged roads in Nebraska and neighboring states. Indeed, General Pick was already organizing relief work before he officially took charge of what he said "probably will wind up as the next biggest bulldozer operation after the Ledo Road."⁶⁰

By the second week in February, Pick's Operation Snowbound command in the Farm Credit Building at Nineteenth and Douglas streets controlled operations in an area of 138,880 square miles in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Before Operation Snowbound demobilized in March, its area of operation reached 193,193 square miles, including part of North Dakota. By then, Snowbound had surpassed the Ledo Road, becoming the largest bulldozer operation in history.⁶¹

As commander of Operation Snowbound, General Pick became deputy commander of the Fifth Army, and officers and equipment of that command were placed under his supervision. Air Force and Navy blizzard relief activities in the Plains region also came under his jurisdiction. The Corps of Engineers offices in Omaha became Operation Snowbound headquarters, and Nebraska field operations were administered from area offices in Ainsworth, Alliance, and North Platte, and sub-area offices in Neligh, O'Neill, Valentine, Mullen, Chadron, Broken Bow, Ogallala, and McCook. A Lincoln office served as liaison with state and other federal officials. Similar administrative structures were created for the



Army Weasels like this one in Broken Bow proved invaluable in the relief effort. They could haul up to a ton, tow a sled, and successfully negotiate the snowy terrain. NSHS-RG3139-99

other states in General Pick's command.⁶²

Early in the emergency, the Red Cross coordinated its relief work from its Midwestern Area office in St. Louis, but when General Pick assumed command of Operation Snowbound, he provided the Red Cross office space and support services at his headquarters in Omaha. For the duration of the emergency Donald W. Stout headed the Red Cross work at Omaha. Although the Red Cross implemented an emergency organizational structure similar to that of General Pick's command, it left much operational latitude to its county chapters.⁶³

Civilian and military officials who made aerial inspections of the snowbound area were impressed with the seriousness of the situation. Near the end of a flight over north-central Nebraska, Assistant Secretary of the Army Gordon Gray said "After what we've just seen in this last stretch, I wouldn't be prepared to argue that there was any one alive down there." However, a humorous perspective came to Governor Peterson in an amateur radio message from his home town of Elgin, in hard-hit Antelope County: "My cow is

hungry as hell. Please toss her a bale of hay when you go over."⁶⁴

During the last week of January and after, bulldozers, Weasels, and Nebraska National Guard equipment were dispatched. Governor Peterson added portions of nine south-central, south-western, and southern Panhandle counties to the storm emergency area, and the Army established a relief office in McCook. The services of the Army and other federal agencies came in addition to \$150,000 in federal disaster funds, which the National Guard used for blizzard relief, and the \$500,000 in state aid appropriated to help counties.

The Guard's Operation Snowbound, using 308 bulldozers, 49 Weasels, and 7 Sno-gos, also came under Gen. Pick's command, and private contractors also helped open roads. In early February 250 guardsmen formed eight-man "mercy teams" in several snowbound areas, and in Cherry and Thomas counties, guardsmen from Lincoln operating bulldozers and hay-laden military trucks brought relief to some 150 ranchers, often leaving roads or trails and following a guide on horseback.⁶⁵

Frameworks of local support were critical to the work of state and federal authorities and the Red Cross. Even before Operation Snowbound began, local and county leaders had formed emergency teams to work with military and civilian agencies in directing bulldozers, deploying Weasels and aircraft, and assisting Air Force Operation Haylift flights. County commissioners (or "supervisors" in some counties), played an important role in relief operations, as did county extension agents and their networks of people who could be relied upon for information and other services. Local organizations, such as the county Red Cross, the American Legion and its auxiliary, and chambers of commerce, provided volunteer labor. In the Alliance area, the Veterans of Foreign Wars were prominent in early relief efforts.⁶⁶

At Bassett, the Lions Club designated an Emergency Committee to work with the Red Cross round the clock. In Ainsworth, the chamber of commerce, with help from the Brown County Commissioners and local Bureau of Reclamation staff, created a Citizen's Emergency committee to coordinate relief work. To advise people about its services, the committee placed a large front-page announcement in the local newspaper, made a "general call" to all farms with telephones, and arranged for the information to be broadcast over radio stations WOW in Omaha and WNAX in Yankton. A chamber of commerce leader, rural electrification officials, county clerks, and the Bureau of Reclamation all helped Ainsworth Air Service pilots locate specific farms and ranches. Bureau of Reclamation staff brought supplies to the airport and helped load relief cargoes.

When a hay shortage developed in the southern Panhandle, price gouging became a possibility. To forestall it, County Agents William P. Bullock of Cheyenne County and Paul E. Miller of Kimball County, along with State Senator Ray Babcock, arranged for hay and alfalfa to be shipped in. Bullock also

Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska

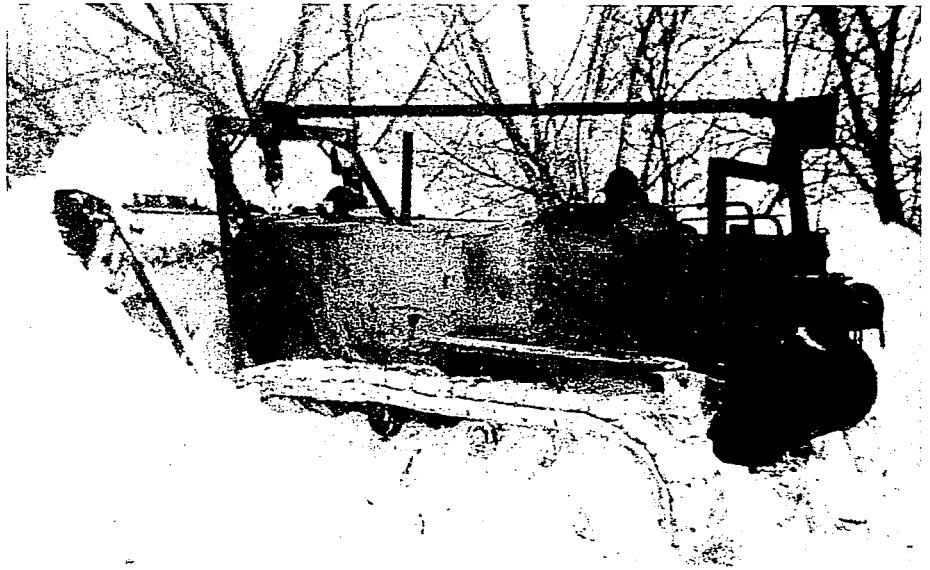
secured the release of a locally held supply of straw.⁶⁷

A 1950 study by Wesley Calef of the University of Chicago denied that real shortages had existed: "At no stage in the later storm period were there any serious local shortages of livestock feed anywhere," the report contended. "The problem was not one of importing livestock feed into a particular area, but of distributing it within that area." Calef's basic point was probably valid, but he may have overstated his case.⁶⁸

Holt County, because of its large size and the severe impact of the winter, was a center of blizzard relief activity. At O'Neill, the county seat, sixty inches of snow had fallen since the November storm. Since November pilots in O'Neill and other Holt County towns had provided some links to the outside and had been transporting necessities, and amateur radio operators also were helpful, but increasing livestock losses were a growing worry. Around 3:00 A.M. on January 23, Kearney Air Base snowplows arrived to clear the airport road and the runway so a C-47 cargo plane could land. Winds and a plow breakdown hampered the work, but it was finished in the next few days.

As the magnitude of the job of opening roads became more evident, the Holt County Board of Supervisors obtained two bulldozers, and private operators brought in additional equipment. On January 25 and 26, the county board met to determine what specific requests to make to the governor. On January 26, relief headquarters were opened in the courthouse basement with staffing provided round the clock by the American Legion Auxiliary taking calls on three telephones from people who needed fuel, food, medical help, or assistance with livestock.

Glenn B. Custer, field director for the St. Louis office of the Red Cross, worked with the board of supervisors to develop plans for an air assessment of four townships in southwestern Holt County. Leaflets would be dropped, explaining signals to be made in the snow indicating



Army and National Guard bulldozers were joined by bulldozers belonging to private contractors. Even these powerful machines encountered packed drifts they could not penetrate. NSHS-RG3139-151

various needs, and planes would then return to look for signals. The storm of January 27 delayed flights after the leaflets were dropped, and the Red Cross quickly added Boyd, Keya Paha, and Rock counties to its O'Neill relief work.

A key figure in Holt County emergency operations was Extension Agent A. Neil Dawes, who contacted "key men" around the county for information about specific needs and to help distribute relief supplies. The USDA Council, a group of extension service leaders in the county, created a base map of critical roads for the Army to use as they dispatched bulldozers. At first, the military commander in charge of Army relief activity may have been disinclined to make full use of the USDA Council, but he soon realized they could help the Army best utilize its equipment and serve as a "buffer" between the military and the public, and he began having daily meetings with the council.

Agent Dawes worked directly in some air and ground relief activities, even running a bulldozer briefly to plow a trail to a remote area. From his office he made radio transcriptions that provided

information about the emergency in Holt County, one of which was picked up by a national network. His office received about eight hundred phone calls in a month from farmers and ranchers in need of assistance. When supplies were needed, Dawes made arrangements, including credit, with local businesses, and he helped the Red Cross find pilots and guides, and performed liaison activities.⁶⁹

In Valentine, the Cherry County Red Cross, working out of the office of the chairman of the county board, coordinated relief work. The county board also provided office space to Army personnel who arrived on January 29. Extension Agent Robert B. Herrington established a network of telephone contacts to all areas of the county but the southwest, which was to be served from Alliance and Mullen. Valentine's head phone operator assisted Herrington in determining switchboard routings, and the Red Cross paid for long distance calls in Nebraska's largest county. A "telephone chairman" in each area would inform Herrington about how cattle were faring, the accessibility of

haystacks, and other details. Dwight Sloan, secretary of the Sandhills Cattle Association, helped compile the data. The telephone chairmen also were instructed to phone the Red Cross in Valentine if emergency assistance were needed. When bulldozers arrived in Cherry County, Herrington's survey was used to rout them to areas of greatest need. The county agent also surveyed animal feed supplies, which would be

commissioners, County Judge Eben W. Moss, Extension Agent Willis Thurber, and two other men were the local relief coordinators. A special telephone was installed in Judge Moss's office for handling requests for assistance. The day after the Garfield County emergency organization was established, Thurber went to Taylor, the seat of Loup County, where he talked to the chairman of the county board and other key

operations in Garfield, Loup, and Blaine counties. When Air Force Operation Haylift flights from Kearney Air Force Base began on January 26, Wagner and others he enlisted provided directions for C-47 "Sky Train" and C-82 "Flying Boxcar" flights to drop hay. In arranging these details Wagner spent six thousand dollars of his own money for hay trucked or flown to Kearney, some of it coming from as far away as Wichita. In the daily operations through the first week of February, Wagner also went on Haylift flights and spent considerable time on the telephone.

In arranging Haylift assistance for Blaine County, Wagner phoned Blaine County Treasurer Dan Norris of Brewster, to inquire about stockmen in that county who needed help. Norris conducted a telephone survey, but to contact ranchers without phones he sought the aid of Herb Hardin, a North Platte pilot, who also flew Red Cross aid missions. Hardin flew over the ranches and dropped notes tied to lumps of coal, giving instructions how to signal if they needed hay. Some recipients did need Haylift drops. Norris said, "We saw much trouble from the air," including seven cows lying dead near one ranch house.

The C-47s carried a payload of two and a half tons, the C-82s, four and a half tons. Along with the crew on each flight was a spotter, as well as Air Force and civilian "kickers"—four or five on the C-47s, and seven or eight on the C-82s—whose job it was to shove the hay out the open cargo doors of the aircraft. Kickers were kept from falling out by straps secured to a bulkhead. The spotter was a civilian familiar with the area, who guided the pilot to the ranch in need. At the sound of a buzzer from the cockpit, the kickers shoved out the bales of hay, most of which broke apart on impact.

Civilians on Haylift missions had to sign a waiver freeing the government of any liability. They also had to designate next of kin. Nevertheless, the atmosphere aboard Haylift flights was cheerful. The



Operation Snowbound sub-area office in the Custer County courthouse, Broken Bow, January 31, 1949. Uniformed men are Capt. G. A. Schrader (facing camera) and Maj. C. E. Cross, both of the Army Corps of Engineers. NSHS-RG3139-88

essential to the recovery of livestock once roads were opened, and he worked with the American Legion and Chamber of Commerce to organize snow-shoveling teams.⁷⁰

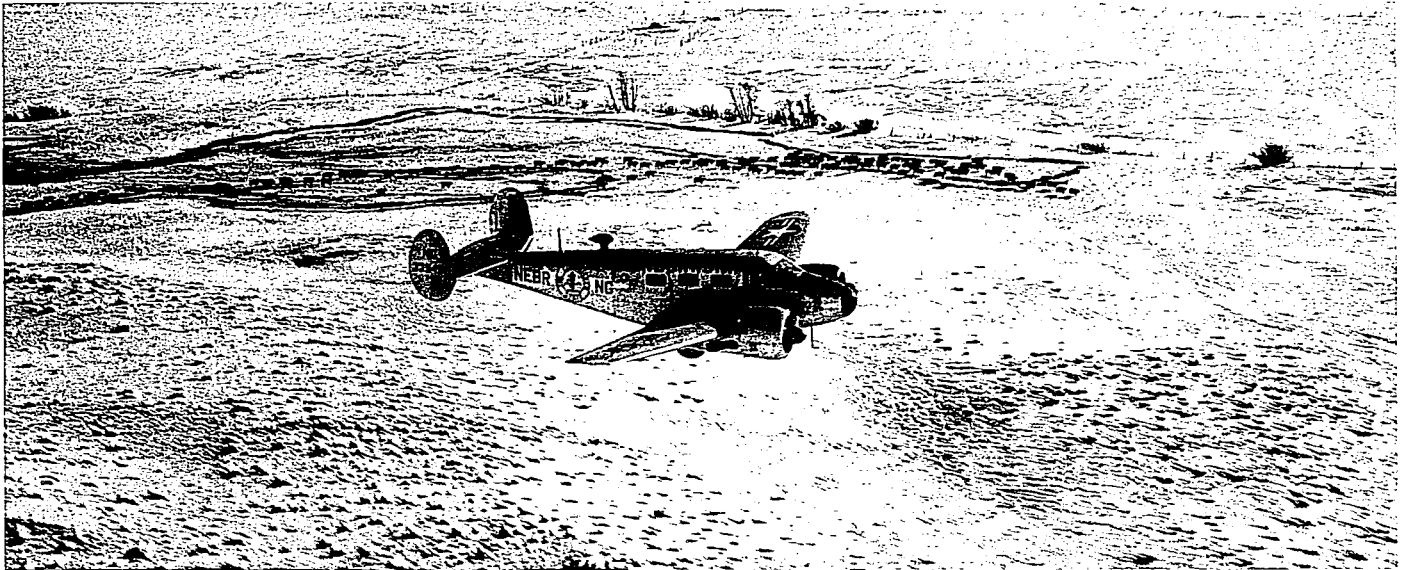
The job of coordinating relief work in Boone County went to Scout Smoyer, a former Army captain and county sheriff. In Chadron, the Dawes County commissioners determined the road clearing priorities for the bulldozers contracted to the Army, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce handled arrangements for Operation Haylift drops.

In Burwell, the three Garfield County

men, and another coordinating body was soon created. When outside assistance arrived Thurber routed Army trucks carrying feed, coal, and other supplies to destinations ordinary vehicles could not reach. As Red Cross home service chairman he also routed emergency flights.

As blizzard relief organizations were created in Garfield and Blaine counties, Burwell organizers arranged for airlifts of hay to ranches in neighboring Loup County. One of the Burwell men, B. W. "Tiny" Wagner, would later be described as "the civilian brains" for Haylift

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A Nebraska National Guard C-45 photographed through the open cargo door of another transport. Operation Haylift dropped hundreds of tons of hay to stranded livestock. NSHS-RG3139-109

Air Force personnel enjoyed the low-level flights, and the civilians were thrilled by the novelty as well as feeling they were doing something useful. Obviously, there was some danger in these missions: two C-47s—one from Kearney and the other from Lowry—were seriously damaged when hay bales struck their vertical stabilizers. Fortunately, both aircraft landed safely at Kearney Air Force Base.

B. W. Wagner and his associates arranged fifty-four drops totaling about 240 tons of hay. Each of the fifty-four ranchers in Garfield, Loup, and Blaine counties received from 34 to 404 bales. The Haylift program coordinated by the Chadron Junior Chamber of Commerce dropped 1,854 bales to twenty-nine local ranchers.⁷¹

Blizzard relief work was a final big moment for the Kearney Air Force Base, which was soon to close. One C-47 sent from Kearney to North Platte on January 10, made seventy-eight or more drops to towns and ranches. Thirteen planes from Kearney's Twenty-seventh Fighter Group were used to search the countryside for distress signals. By the last week of January, eleven C-47s and ten C-82s from Kearney were available for

Operation Haylift duty. The snowplows and their crews dispatched to O'Neill represented a peculiar contribution from Kearney Air Force Base.

Belying the base's imminent demise was the activity at its public information office. Radio Station WOW in Omaha routinely used material from the base in its evening newscasts, and the airmen sent to O'Neill were filmed and interviewed by Army newsreel units. Operation Haylift was the topic of many press releases from the Information Office, and the Air Force welcomed such good publicity. In an internal report the office described a peak in the relief work as "the best weekly period that we have covered," emerging from a situation "that normally would not arise."⁷²

Even before the Haylift flights from Kearney, planes from Lowry Field in Denver had been carrying hay to stranded cattle and sheep in western Nebraska. Some hay was brought to Alliance for use by aircraft from Lowry, and some Haylift flights to the Sheridan County and Pine Ridge Reservation area along the Nebraska-South Dakota border came from Rapid City Air Force Base. According to the Strategic Air Command, two Haylift missions were

flown from Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha.

Not everyone was convinced the Haylift flights were useful. As the operation got underway on a large scale, Governor Peterson called the innovation "impractical" and apparently considered it a publicity stunt. In fact, the vast number of cattle needing feed did render Haylift impractical compared to the relief that could be supplied by ground-based operations. Haylift crews tried to drop bales as close to livestock as possible, but even if it landed within a hundred yards, animals caught in ice-crusted drifts might not be able to reach it. Sometimes cattle were frightened by the aircraft and bolted.

Dan Norris probably put Operation Haylift in proper perspective when he said, "No doubt the operation did a great deal of good in its way. It was a temporary measure, and kept cattle alive until they could be fed in the natural way."⁷³

On the ground Weasels, operated by the Army and the Air Force, were crucial to relief activity. They could move across deep snow at about six miles per hour and haul up to a ton, half of which could be the load of a towed sled.

Lighter loads were more appropriate for operations in rugged terrain.

Weasels proved invaluable in unplowed areas, such as the Table area south of Chadron, a high, wind-lashed plain that was isolated by the blizzard. Through the initiative of the Chadron Chamber of Commerce and the Red Cross, an Air Force officer, a crew of six men, and two Weasels from the 2151st

yeast cakes, evaporated milk, lard, and soap.⁷⁴

Glenn Custer of the St. Louis Red Cross office, along with the Sioux County Red Cross chairman, the county attorney, and a prominent local rancher arranged to bring part of the 2151st Air Rescue contingent to Sioux County following their work near Chadron. The Red Cross bore the cost of trucking

doctor to a rural patient. Weasel crews also took mail to areas where deliveries had been sporadic. A Norden resident remarked, "We were knee-deep in reading on February 4th after the Weasel brought our mail. We got eleven *State Journals*, four county papers, four magazines and some letters." Throughout the blizzard area, the vehicles reached many families whose plight was otherwise unknown.

The arrival of a Weasel was a great event for snowbound families. On January 22, early in the relief work, a Chadron couple, having seen no one for thirty days, was so happy to welcome a Weasel crew that they ran outside without putting on their coats.⁷⁶

On February 3, a Weasel arriving at Cal and Irene Westover's ranch and temporary school near the western border of Cherry County brought a similar response. Irene wrote,

An Army Weasel brought our mail and a load of groceries just at dark. Cal called us and we all ran out just as we were, Joe with a spoon and dish towel in his hands, Celia with paper and scissors, all of us with no coats and it was cold. We got coffee, bacon, breakfast food, beans, yeast and lard. Then Cal got a pound of dried prunes with the intention of having stewed prunes but he never had a chance. The kids had eaten that box of prunes before he got his chores done.

Cargo totals of Red Cross supplies carried by Army Weasels from Spalding suggest the importance of those vehicles in the blizzard relief operation. The *Spalding Enterprise* reported,

These figures reached the following totals: 28,550 pounds of coal; 15,030 pounds of feed; 10,035 pounds of fuel; 2,870 pounds of food; plus five trips for repairs and one trip in delivering medicine.

Bulldozers and other equipment hired by the state or operated under General Pick's command were the back-



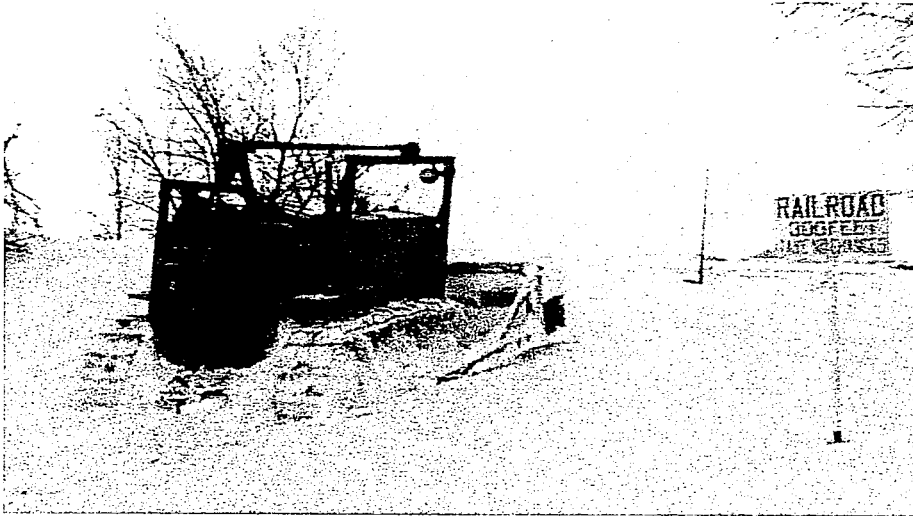
Road clearing crews soon discovered that redripping of previously opened roads, like this one near Emerson, Thurston County, was less likely when snow was plowed into sloped rather than vertical banks. NSHS-RG3139-14

Air Rescue Squadron, Lowry Field, came to Dawes County after finishing blizzard relief work in Colorado, Wyoming, and near Scottsbluff. Soon they were joined by a Weasel from Lowry Field. The C. A. Hakanson home on the highway crossing the Table became an information center, the supply depot to which provisions were trucked, and operations base for the Weasels. On the Table, as elsewhere, a local person accompanied the Weasel crew as a guide. When the Weasels reached homes lacking provisions, each family was given a Red Cross package containing flour, sugar, salt, bacon, oatmeal, beans, coffee,

equipment and the expenses of the Air Force personnel, and the work proceeded much like it had in Dawes County: A Weasel and cargo toboggan were hauled to the 33 Ranch southwest of Harrison, which served as a supply center. By February 3, after about two weeks work in northwestern Nebraska, the 2151st Air Rescue Squadron had assisted 162 families.⁷⁵

Around Gordon, an Army Weasel carried many loads of milk to dairies, in addition to hauling coal and groceries. In one day, an Army Weasel brought two expectant women to Bloomfield, and a Weasel from Burwell took a

Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska



Operation Snowbound bulldozers were the backbone of road work. Machines ran twenty hours straight, with four hours off for maintenance. NSHS-RG3139-151

bone of road clearing efforts. Although Army agreements with private operators provided for two daily shifts of ten hours with four hours off for maintenance, contractors commonly preferred to keep their bulldozers running continuously to minimize restarting problems in the severe cold. Work continued every day of the week.⁷⁷

Speed was essential, and contractors quickly rounded up equipment and crews for blizzard work. In Denver, for example, the Hutchinson Construction Company received a request for its services on January 30, and was on the job near Antioch (east of Alliance) within two days. Like other outsiders unfamiliar with the areas in which they were working, "catskinners" (bulldozer operators) relied on local guides. Exceptionally long hours in harsh conditions were common, and the *Alliance Times and Herald* quoted Vern Copsey, who worked in Sheridan and Box Butte counties:

Cat-skinners are a rugged lot of men used to bad weather and tough work, but this was just about the toughest assignment any of them had ever had. Working throughout the night with the weather around 20 below and the sharp snow and ice beating them in the face and

wetting their clothes you can appreciate what kind of a job it was.

With exceptions, including the gravel-surfaced State Highway 29 south of Harrison and U.S. Highway 183 south of Bassett, also graveled, the frequent northerly winds left much more severe drifting over east-west roads than over those running north-south, and bulldozer crews usually opened north-south roads first, allowing them to assault the drifts on east-west roads from two directions. Crews found that redrifting was less likely if snow was plowed into sloped banks rather than into vertical windrows. Adding to the difficulty, equipment weight sometimes exceeded bridge capacities in remote areas, which might mean driving the machinery around the source of a creek.⁷⁸ Operation Snowbound bulldozers not only opened roads and lanes, they also plowed feedlots and paths to haystacks, and sometimes hauled heavy loads of relief supplies. For example, the USDA Council in Holt County constructed three sleds for hauling groceries, coal, oil, hay, and protein supplement. In one instance, a procession of three Army Caterpillars and four sleds made a twenty-three-mile night trek to the northeast from O'Neill "across fields, meadows, and wherever



Snowbanks on the Dunning-Brewster road, Blaine County. As the road clearing progressed into early February, liberated rural residents flocked to towns, stocking up on groceries, fuel, and feed. NSHS-RG3139-103

[sic] possible to make the best time" to reach the Gibson School. Although one machine failed en route, the thirteen-ton cargo reached its destination where County Agent Dawes had arranged for local help to distribute the provisions.

Northeastern Holt County was particularly hard hit, and the school became a focal point for Red Cross relief work. As Dawes said,

The Gibson school in addition to serving as a distribution point served as a refuge for machine operators, Weasel crews, stranded persons, [and] truck drivers. Roads were opened to the school and supplies stock piled. Fuel trucks and bottled gas trucks were able to fill up part of the patrons along the way . . . and also to meet the others at the school house and fill barrels before the road was drifted shut again.⁷⁹

The arrival of snow-clearing equipment and crews was probably an even greater symbol of the return of normal life for farm and ranch families than was the visit of a Weasel or an airdrop of mail. Around 5:00 P.M. on February 1, at their ranch near Inman, Harvey and Lois Tompkins and their daughter Linelle, quickly prepared a supper of eggs, pancakes, and coffee for a bulldozer crew of seven. "Very exciting evening" said Lois Tompkins in her diary entry. At 5:00 A.M. on February 11, they served breakfast to another crew. The four men, with two bulldozers and a truck, plowed a new trail through a pasture and opened six haystacks.

When bulldozers reached the Kendall ranch in the Niobrara River country north of Bassett about 6:00 A.M. on February 4, their crew members were happy to get out of the twenty-below-zero weather and have some coffee before clearing haystacks and side roads. As the local news correspondent said, "We were [as] pleased to see them as Columbus was to see the treasured land."

On February 9, around 11:00 A.M., two

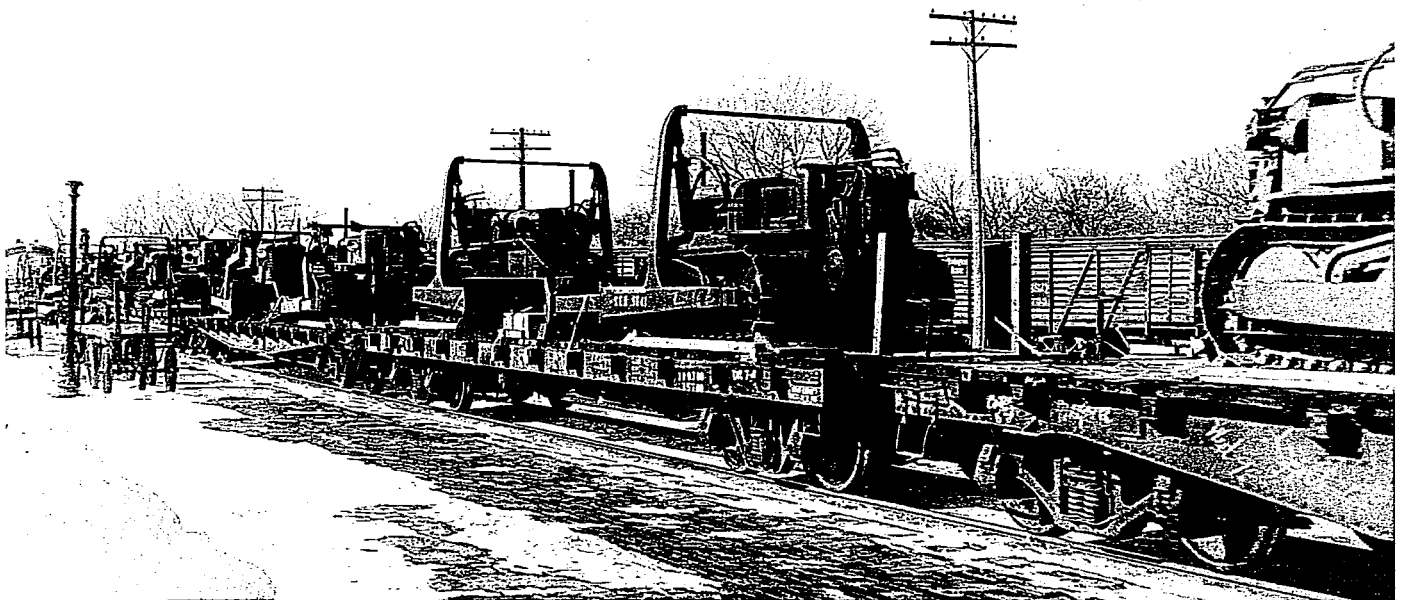
bulldozers and other equipment arrived at the Cal and Irene Westover ranch in Cherry County, where Cecilia Sandoz had been conducting school. "Celia just dismissed school," said Irene Westover, adding, "There was no use of trying to study with something as interesting as bulldozers outside." Cal Westover and his neighbors Norm Miller and Glen Jackson joined the newcomers as guides, and the snow clearing went on through the night. The cold but rewarding task helped ease more than a month of hardship. As Irene Westover said,

The Army truck took all of our fuel oil barrels and some of Norm's and had them filled for us since Cal and Norm were both busy and could not go. The dozers plowed out our corrals for us too so now Cal can quit carrying water to those two bulls that have been in one of the corrals all this time.⁸⁰

Governor Peterson and others urged farmers and ranchers to get to town and acquire ample provisions as soon as their roads were opened, lest they be

marooned by another storm. As had been the case with rural people who had managed to get out earlier, most needed little prompting. In Chadron, one liberated rancher spent almost six hundred dollars for provisions including canned, cured, and fresh meat costing more than two hundred dollars. He also bought forty loaves of bread, which he planned to freeze outside; forty-eight pounds of coffee; twenty-four bottles of catsup; many cases of canned goods; and thirty cartons of cigarettes. Adjusted for 2003 values, his grocery spree would cost about \$4,600. At Ericson, in Wheeler County, the opened roads meant a busy time for the post office, as people sent out their Christmas mail. Via Weasel and sled, the community of Star, in northeastern Holt County, received twenty-five bags of mail in mid-February, its first delivery since December 23.

The influx of people to the towns must have been a joy to businessmen. Broken Bow was on the southern edge of the storm area, but the local newspaper editor estimated that the community had lost half its business because of



As rail lines were opened, Operation Snowbound coordinators shipped in hundreds of bulldozers and other heavy equipment. This train, photographed at Broken Bow, was bound for Alliance. NSHS-RG3139-98

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blocked roads. To the north, the editor of the Ainsworth paper also spoke of the effects of the winter on business. The difficult travel conditions for many rural Nebraskans also affected retail business in Omaha.

January 1949 was a month of record snowfall, but no more blizzards hampered the work of the Fifth Army in Nebraska. A storm on the first weekend in February produced only brief drifting in parts of the state. Nevertheless, Gov. Peterson added four northeastern counties to the disaster area that now encompassed all of forty-four counties and parts of five others. After a week in charge of the Fifth Army's relief operations, General Pick said, "Operation Snowbound now is down to a job. The glamour is gone."

On February 7, temperatures rose to the low 40s in much of the Panhandle, and on February 10, after temperatures below freezing and some new drifting, the mercury again reached the 40s in the west. The next day the temperature reached 50 degrees or higher. The thaw was less dramatic in the northeast, but in western Nebraska Chinook winds melted the snow rapidly.⁸¹

Nevertheless, Operation Snowbound continued. In the second week of February, in Perkins County, on the southwestern edge of the problem area, local snow-clearing crews were joined by ten bulldozers and a rotary plow from the federal operation. The newspaper commented that the work of a bulldozer in the Lone Star neighborhood in rural Perkins County made it possible for people to be "once again driving down the road instead of crossing fields and ditches." On February 14, a bulldozer cleared the streets of Grafton, some of which had not been open since the big November storm.

By February 9, there were 132 bulldozers at work in Holt County, although ground blizzards briefly halted plowing. On February 10, twenty-four bulldozers, twelve trucks, and four other machines were working in Rock County. The Army owned half of the bulldozers working Rock County; the rest were hired



Feb. 16-1949
After army bulldozers released us from our snow prison, after weeks of continued snows and blizzards

The handwritten caption for this photo of H. R. Holcomb of rural Chambers, Holt County, expresses the relief most people felt at the arrival of the bulldozers. NSHS-RG3139-76

from private contractors. Of about 125 men working for the Corps of Engineers in Rock County, sixty-six were civil service employees, and the remainder construction company workers.

In other north-central and northeastern counties, the work went on with equal vigor. In the Panhandle, the thaw helped Operation Snowbound move ahead rapidly, despite new drifting on February 9. In fact, in twenty-four hours (February 9-10), 840 miles of Panhandle roads were opened. With the roads open, the Rushville Chamber of Commerce and the American Legion post held a free dance "to celebrate the fine job completed by 'Operation Snowbound.'" On February 7-8, strong winds blowing across bare fields brought heavy drifts of dust to the western section of Gering.

On February 12, the brief thaw ended as a cold wave and strong winds moved

into Nebraska. Except in the Omaha area, the snow was not heavy, but new drifting and the bitter cold briefly slowed the latter stages of Operation Snowbound. In two or three days, mild weather returned, once again followed by temperatures that fell to zero and below. However, the second half of February was distinctly milder than the first two weeks. High temperatures above freezing became the norm in the central and western parts of the state's blizzard area, and while the moderation was again less pronounced in the northeast, that section enjoyed from five to nine days when the mercury rose above 32 degrees.⁸²

For the Tompkins family near Inman, Sunday, February 20, brought a feeling that life was returning to normal, and Lois Tompkins remarked in her diary, "Went to church! First time since Dec. 19."

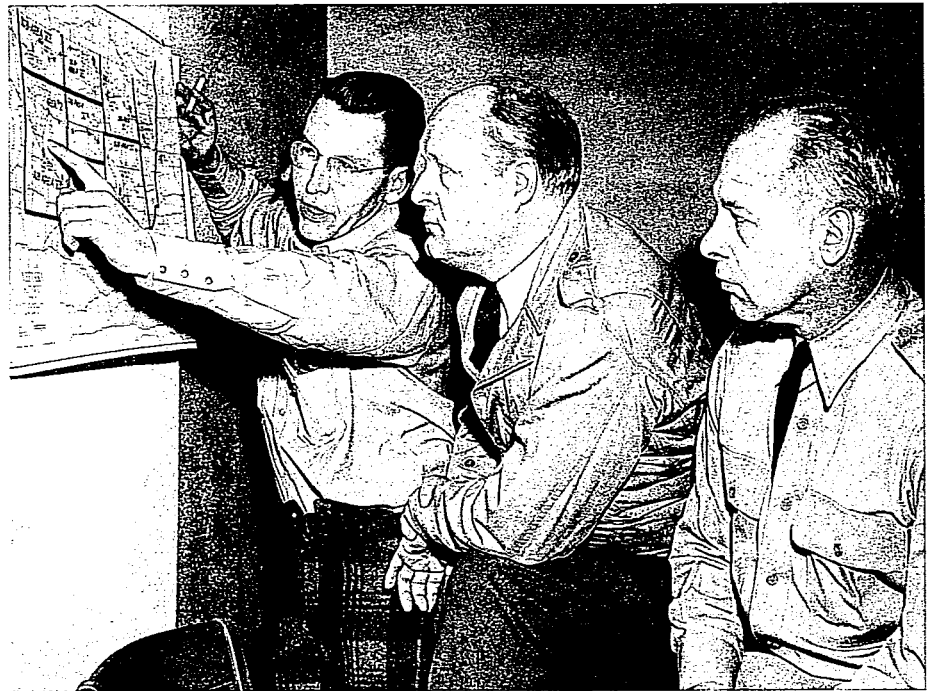
The improving weather in

Nebraska allowed Operation Snowbound to concentrate on North Dakota and Wyoming, where severe conditions persisted. On February 13, Weasels from Ainsworth were flown to North Dakota. Within the next few days the bulldozers left several north-central counties. "Army Crews Win 'Battle Of Drifts,'" proclaimed a large headline in the *Alliance Times* and *Herald* on February 18. The next day, General Pick's headquarters issued orders for demobilization in the eleven counties of the Panhandle, and in the third and fourth weeks of February, Operation Snowbound gradually drew to a close throughout the state.

Inevitably, a few people were critical of Operation Snowbound and the earlier snow-clearing efforts. In Washington, Senator Wayne Morse, an Oregon Republican, contended that "Army red tape" had slowed the work. From Clinton in Sheridan County, Nebraska, came the complaint that the Operation Snowbound plowing had been very meager. There were some complaints about the priorities for plowing. A few farmers in Keya Paha County objected to minor property damage from bulldozers cutting across their land.

Most Nebraskans, however, took a positive view. Indeed, Operation Snowbound drew praise from the people of the blizzard area. As the Cheyenne County commissioners said, the Army had done a "tremendous and effective job." When crews arrived at farms and ranches, they received generous hospitality and, as a sergeant from Fort Riley, Kansas, working in the Rushville area, said, "Boy do they feed you!"⁸³

The ground operation had its dangers, and there were some casualties. On February 4, the proprietor of the Dunlap store between Alliance and Chadron was killed when he accidentally engaged a lever on a machine that he was adjusting. A sergeant from Camp Carson, Colorado, assigned to Operation Snowbound duty at Mullen, Nebraska, fell to his death in a basement when he walked through what he



A relief worker explains Operation Snowbound details to Gov. Peterson (center) as a Fifth Army officer looks on. NSHS-RG3139-115

thought was the restroom door at the local cafe. Ironically, he was a decorated veteran of World War II campaigns in Africa and Europe.⁸⁴

Individualism characterized life in the hard-hit areas of Nebraska and surrounding states. In Nebraska, the sense of self-sufficiency had been evident through the previous decade in the triumph of a fiscally conservative Republicanism, which portrayed the liberal policies of the Democratic administrations of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman as assaults upon American individualism. But in late January, political ideology temporarily gave way to the huge snowdrifts that threatened lives and a significant portion of the state's economy. From Operation Snowbound's outset, Gen. Lewis A. Pick made it clear that the Fifth Army was waging all-out combat against the snowdrifts, and daily reports of people and livestock liberated were not unlike the exhilarating news of Allied advances in the latter days of the recent World War II.

Nebraskans saw the practicality of this energetic, sensible approach to a problem that they generally recognized could not be solved on their own. One scholar described General Pick as the hero of the moment, adding, "What happens in emergencies, of course, is that the hero battling nature, though he be a federal hero, neutralizes the expectation of self-reliance."⁸⁵

The military and civilian personnel who spent long, cold hours day and night in the countryside shared this heroic mantle. Key to the clearing work were the bulldozers and "catskinners" who ran them, opening country roads, lanes, farmyards, and haystacks. But the relationship between General Pick and bulldozers predated the emergency, having been built to a large degree upon the huge Pick-Sloan plan of 1944 for building dams on the Missouri River.⁸⁶

Work on the first of these dams in the Dakotas had begun at Fort Randall, South Dakota in 1946.⁸⁷ From his Omaha Division Headquarters of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, General Pick had



Gov. Peterson (center), in Alliance, receives a briefing from the city manager, Roberts W. Laing (left), and an unidentified man in uniform. NSHS-RG3139-110

developed the relationships with civilian contractors who, among other contributions, provided the equipment needed in massive earth-moving projects. In short, implementing the Pick-Sloan plan gave General Pick and the Corps of Engineers exceptional contacts with contractors whose personnel and equipment would be at the heart of Operation Snowbound. Put in the broadest perspective, the assistance that the Army and other federal agencies provided to Nebraska and other winter-plagued states in January and February 1949 was but one such contribution

extending from the earliest settlement to the present.⁸⁸

The number of people employed in Operation Snowbound between its formal creation on January 29 and the start of "final demobilization" on March 15 varied, but the "peak of operation" came on February 9-10 when 6,237 persons were counted. This figure included 4,008 private contract workers, eighteen employees of the National Red Cross, and 959 civil service employees of the Missouri River Division of the Army Corps of Engineers. In sum, Operation Snowbound employed a maximum of

4,985 civilians. At this point, 1,252 members of the armed forces were assigned to Operation Snowbound. Their numbers included 807 from the Army; 293 from the Air Force; 136 members of the National Guard; and 16 in the Navy. Of course, additional people were under Operation Snowbound command at other times. For example, the total naval contingent included 35 persons, and, as noted earlier, some 250 members of the Nebraska National Guard were on duty in early February. Suggestive of Snowbound's variable personnel needs was the Fifth Army's observation that, "The demobilization phase commenced before the termination of the operational phase."⁸⁹

Mindful of public relations, the Snowbound command routinely released figures on miles of road cleared and people and livestock freed. The final compilation demonstrated the magnitude of the undertaking:

Operation 'Snowbound' had operated in an area of 193,193 square miles in four states populated by 1,214,592 people. Estimates by the field forces during the operation showed that 4,011,184 cattle had been saved from possible starvation, and 243,780 people had been freed from the clutches of the storm. To achieve this end, 115,138 miles of road had been cleared of snow by some 1,600 major pieces of equipment operated and supervised by 6,000 men.⁹⁰

These figures imply the tremendous administrative challenge that made Operation Snowbound possible. Paperwork had to be done to engage more than a thousand contractors, many of whom had to be paid often. Accordingly, Operation Snowbound was prepared to render weekly compensation. In a comment that belied the stereotype of government bureaucracy, Snowbound's official report noted, "In special cases, payments to contractors were made upon a maximum of two hours notice. Payrolls and per diem claims were

received, processed and checks drawn therefore within a 24-hour period. Delivery thereof was usually made immediately by Government vehicle."⁹¹

Aside from working with contractors large and small, Operation Snowbound had to supervise the deployment of military personnel from many posts around the country. Bulldozers, Weasels, and other government-owned equipment had to be routed to initial and subsequent designations. Although contractors "having more than three machines" were responsible for the maintenance of their own machinery, Operation Snowbound sometimes obtained and delivered parts for them. For its work in Nebraska, Operation Snowbound deployed twenty-one civilian mechanics. A civilian employee of the Corp of Engineers in Omaha "devoted his entire time to the making of local purchases of spare parts and accessories for Caterpillar and Allis Chalmers Tractors." Corps engineer maintenance teams from the Kansas City Engineer District were sent to Nebraska subareas of Operation Snowbound and "heavy equipment specialists" were brought in from various points.⁹²

In mid to late February, Operation Snowbound shifted its focus from Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming to North Dakota. On March 4, Brig. Gen. George C. Stewart, who had taken command of Operation Snowbound when General Pick became Chief of the Corps of Engineers, moved Snowbound's headquarters to Fort Lincoln in Bismarck, "leaving only a small rear echelon in Omaha."⁹³

Nevertheless, Omaha had served as the command center for the heart of Operation Snowbound's work, and the massive operation highlighted the city's central location, a point that would be underscored a few years later when the Army Corps of Engineers developed its massive system of dams on the upper Missouri River.

In retrospect, the Fifth Army found no major flaws in the functioning of Operation Snowbound. In its

"Observations and Lessons," the Army did point to minor problems relevant to such a winter mission. For example, the lights on some bulldozers were mounted so low that snow crossing the blade broke them, and operating the otherwise excellent two-and-one-half-ton, six-by-six Army trucks for too long in deep snow proved hard on clutches. The report concluded that winter clothing was generally adequate. Although some winter eyewear had been issued, there had been cases of snow blinding; and the report advised that snow glasses should be required for similar future missions.⁹⁴

"Contrary to general belief, a light thaw crusting the snow to a depth of two or three inches will not prevent drifting." Winds above thirty-five miles per hour eroded the crust, and an advancing "pulverizing effect" led to a "ground blizzard."⁹⁵

Anecdotal evidence implies that low-income rural people generally were more affected by the emergency than were the more affluent. This was obvious in the difficulties of the off-reservation Indians around Alliance and Gordon, but Native farmers also seem to have had an especially hard time. Theodore Martel, an official involved in Indian

OPERATION SNOWBOUND

- 193,193 square miles in four states
- 4,011,184 cattle saved from starvation
- 243,780 snowbound people freed
- 115,138 miles of road cleared
- 1,600 pieces of heavy equipment
- 6,000-man workforce

Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 1949

NSHS-RG3139-82

The report also made some important points about coping with winter wind on the Plains. It declared, "Snow fences in this area were built for the volume of snow expected during a normal year. The snow during this season was so heavy that the capacity of the snow fences was completely inadequate." The report went on to make two curious points about ice-crusting snow. Although it noted instances in which crusted, wind-compacted drifts did not break under the weight of bulldozers, it said

agriculture, said, "Nebraska's Indians are forced to let their livestock starve because of the lack of feed or money to purchase it." Through the sponsorship of the Auburn Junior Chamber of Commerce, Nemaha County farmers gave more than two truckloads of hay to assist Indian farmers in Knox County. The Red Cross provided the contact between the Auburn group and H. E. Bruce, superintendent of the Winnebago Indian Agency, who directed the hay to the Niobrara area.⁹⁶

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Direct Red Cross assistance to Indians had been especially timely. All told, the organization spent \$3,257.06 to help 635 Native people who were stranded in northwestern Nebraska. In the Niobrara country, the Red Cross also spent \$378.53 to aid twenty-seven Santee families. Most of the Red Cross expenditures for Indian relief went for food and fuel.⁹⁷

Indeed, the work of the Red Cross throughout the blizzard area exemplified the melding of local and external human, material, and financial resources in meeting the emergency. On February 28, 1949, the Red Cross reported that it had spent or committed \$67,464 for blizzard relief in Nebraska. However, two years later, the American Red Cross completed a final report showing that Nebraska's Red Cross chapters had spent \$77,953.08 for storm-related relief. Of this sum, \$20,456.53 came from the chapters themselves, supplemented by \$339.73 from "individuals and organizations." The remaining \$57,156.82 came from American Red Cross National Headquarters. Red Cross National Headquarters spent an additional \$10,432.38, of which \$7,139.82 was administrative expense. From this total of \$88,385.46, rescue and transportation work consumed \$50,356.98, while the other principal categories included \$20,070.30 for "food, clothing, and other maintenance," and \$5,478.65 for medical activity. In 2003 dollars, the grand total would be about \$683,300. Of course, money was only part of the story, for hundreds of volunteers did Red Cross work in Nebraska.⁹⁸

Most notable was the total of 3,310 Nebraska families who received "Food, Fuel, and Medicines" with Red Cross help. In addition, the Red Cross evacuated 104 persons by ground and 156 by air, some of them in combined air and ground missions. At the grass-roots level, forty Red Cross chapters did relief work in thirty-nine counties, providing assistance ranging from aid to military personnel stranded in Omaha to a host of services to rural Nebraskans. Some county chapters received all of their blizzard relief funds from national headquarters; others used



Bulldozers not only cleared roads like this one in Box Butte County, they also towed sleds packed with groceries, animal feed, fuel, and other supplies to isolated farms and ranches, evacuated people in distress and, on at least one occasion in Brown County, hauled a load of hogs to market. NSHS-RG3139-108

entirely their own money, and some funded their work from both sources.⁹⁹

Not surprisingly, some of the heaviest Red Cross expenditures occurred in the north-central counties that bore the brunt of the winter. Holt County, the largest in this core area, led the state in number of families receiving Red Cross assistance, ARC funds expended, and local Red Cross assistance. The neighboring Rock County chapter paid the full cost of local Red Cross airborne relief activity.¹⁰⁰

Although the Army, Air Force, Nebraska National Guard, and Red Cross

were the most prominent relief organizations, other agencies and individuals also made notable contributions. Although it was a fighter squadron, the Nebraska Air National Guard reported more than 120 hours of emergency-related flying, primarily in reconnaissance and support for other missions. Eight of the eleven Nebraska Civil Air Patrol units engaged in Red Cross work flew 300 missions or about 400 hours. Two CAP aviators also flew 114 missions, or 238 hours, for the Red Cross "at commercial rates."¹⁰¹



U.S. Highway 20 near McLean, Pierce County, like many highways and rural roads in the blizzard area, had to be reopened several times. The high banks of snow left from multiple plowings remained well into spring. Courtesy Neil Becker, Omaha

On the ground, personnel and equipment from the Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot helped clear roads from Holdrege to McCook, and Naval Reservists from Lincoln and Omaha were sent to North Platte and Ainsworth to establish emergency radio communications serving with other military and civilian personnel as part of a special Operation Snowbound radio network. Sixty-eight amateur radio operators were ready to provide back-up service if this system failed.¹⁰²

A bulldozer from the Bureau of Reclamation project at Mirage Flats in Sheridan County was used to plow Sandhills roads, and to the east, a bulldozer and crew from the Nebraska National Forest (Bessey Reserve) cleared roads and plowed trails to haystacks near Elsmere in southeastern Cherry County. At Ainsworth, four large sleds, built thorough the efforts of the Brown County Commission, the Bureau of Reclamation, and a construction company, served rural residents. When a farmer south of town exhausted his supply of feed, one of these sleds

hauled thirty-nine of his hogs to market. Bulldozer-drawn sleds hauled some twenty tons of cotton cake (pressed cottonseeds used as cattle feed), fuel, and food from Ainsworth to the Elsmere store, where ranchers picked up the supplies.

Bulldozers and operators from Soil Conservation Service districts, including districts in southeastern South Dakota and areas of Nebraska outside the storm zone, joined Operation Snowbound, and SCS personnel served as spotters on Haylift flights. The Iowa Legislature provided assistance and rotary plows to the Cornhusker State. Within Nebraska, the Lancaster County Board sent two bulldozers to help plow roads in Garfield County. Of course, local people did much to help themselves, and snow removal expenses for municipal and county governments in the blizzard area were exceptional.¹⁰³

Operations Haylift and Snowbound demonstrated that federal agencies with the financial resources, equipment, and organizational capacity were essential to a massive relief effort. The work of

the military, including the Omaha-based Missouri River Division of the Corps of Engineers and the Air Force, cast them in a favorable light, and the military services were mindful of that fact.¹⁰⁴

Despite the organizational diversity of the relief efforts, the various agencies worked together efficiently. In its assessment of Operation Snowbound, the Fifth Army called the undertaking "a classic of harmonious teamwork between the Army and the Air Force." Nine officers and enlisted men from the Tenth Air Force including Team Commander Lt. Col. Joe K. McNay served at General Pick's Headquarters. "Under this arrangement," said the Fifth Army's report, "decisions as to what missions were to be flown were made by the disaster force commander while command and administrative functions of Air Force personnel and equipment remained with the Air Force."¹⁰⁵

An exceptionally important cooperative effort was that of the Red Cross and General Pick's command. The American Red Cross and the Army Corps of Engineers had an established

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relationship in flood relief work, a fact that undoubtedly facilitated their association during Operation Snowbound. When General Pick ended his Operation Snowbound command to become Chief of the Army Engineers, he highly praised the contributions of the national Red Cross and its local chapters.¹⁰⁶

Like most Americans, the most routine relationship Nebraskans in the blizzard area usually had with the federal government was through the postal system. Although rural mail service was severely disrupted, mail carriers were sometimes key people in the battle to maintain a semblance of normal life. One such person was Harley Smith, who served the rural McLean area in north-eastern Pierce County that was hammered by storms from November onward. Smith ordinarily used a Model-A Ford for deliveries, but when that was no longer possible, he used a horse. When he could no longer get through with a horse, he walked. Neil Becker, who lived on a farm on Smith's route, described him as "a great mail man."

Milder weather by mid-February brought some ranchers the grim job of skinning winter-killed animals. At Alliance, a new rendering plant processed carcasses, which brought some economic return to stockmen. From the Kimball area, the frozen carcasses of sheep and cattle were pulled from drifts and trucked to rendering plants in Cheyenne and Denver.¹⁰⁷

Even though the emergency was over, bad road conditions, especially mud, burdened winter-weary Nebraskans. On February 24, the *Harrison Sun* observed:

Warm weather the past week has turned Sioux County's dirt surfaced roads into rutted quagmires making travel almost impossible at times. Melting of [a] considerable amount snow . . . is causing a rapid runoff of water. In many places the water is trapped in the roads by the drifts and windrows thrown up by the



The March 30-31 snowstorm left eighteen inches on the H. R. Holcomb farm in Holt County. Mrs. Holcomb had long since learned to carry a scoop shovel at all times and bring it into the house at night in case she once again had to "shovel out in the morning." NSHS-RG3139-78

snow clearing equipment forming large puddles that are at times impassable.

The clearing of State Highway 29, which linked Harrison with the Mitchell-Scottsbluff area, had been very difficult, and, as the *Sun* noted, warmer weather created a new challenge:

Reports from those who travel Highway 29, south of Harrison, report the road turned into a canal with water three to four feet deep in places. Those normally using that road are forced to take to the prairie and hunt trails.

Elsewhere the slowly melting snow drifts flooded lowlands, impairing local travel. Some Rock County people had to use hill roads to avoid flooded terrain. As one person reported on March 2, there were still drifts twenty feet high, and some meadows were covered by upwards of six feet of water. The following week, postman Ivan Deweese noted that drifts as high as twenty feet still could be seen along his route southeast of Bassett. Some rural residents resorted to using their tractors to pull their cars to and from a passable road or highway—an expedient similar to what some of them had done in the dead of winter. As the snow gave way to mud, Lois Tompkins must have summarized the experience of thousands of people in the blizzard area when she wrote in her diary, "Roads Awful."

Any protracted winter brings expense and inconvenience in street maintenance. It took nearly two weeks to clear Sidney's streets after the January blizzard, and garbage collection was delayed until machinery suitable for clearing the alleys could be obtained. By late January, Grant had spent seven hundred dollars to clear its business area—a significant burden for a small community. About a month later, as winter's muddy decline brought awful driving conditions to unpaved roads in Perkins County, Grant's merchants felt the effects of the latest obstruction to travel. Some people contended that the State Highway Department had long failed to meet its road maintenance duties in Perkins County, but town streets also presented a dismal scene. "Here in Grant," said the local paper, the streets are just quagmires of mud, with ruts where people have driven cars. The blacktop paving on Central Avenue is fast breaking up."

Complaints from civic leaders in Bassett during January and February about deficiencies in state maintenance of highways in Rock County illustrate the timeless localism in highway politics. Earlier, *Rock County Leader* publisher Clifford Buckendorf had complained

that the highway north from Ainsworth was receiving more attention than was U.S. 183 that ran north and south through Bassett. In 1949, both roads were gravel, joining north of Bassett at Springview. However, Highway 7, the road north from Ainsworth, was a state highway, not a federal route like U.S. 183.

Although Buckendorf did not note this point, the federal status of Highway 183 might imply that it should have received equal, or higher priority. However, aside from the problem of getting supplies to Norden, traffic volume may have been heavier on State Highway 7, and it is noteworthy that as Nebraska's highway system evolved, the designations of the highways north from the Bassett-Ainsworth area were reversed—State Highway 7 now runs north from Bassett and U.S. 183 runs north from a point five miles east of Ainsworth.¹⁰⁸

In a mid-January letter to Governor Peterson signed "Just a farmer's wife," Mrs. J. Fred Christensen, who lived three miles away from a highway in the Creighton area of Knox County, described the difficulty of getting children to school and other problems of isolation during the exceptionally hard winter. She believed that the county and state were lax in plowing local roads. "There isn't anything done to these roads winter or summer," she said. "There's a month each fall & spring [children] can't hardly get to school for mud. There's two to three months every winter our mail doesn't get to our box." Clearly, her lament looked beyond the current situation to more routine hardships for some Plains people.¹⁰⁹

As the winter of 1948–49 wore on, the heavy snow and ice cover on the Plains brought the prospect of serious flooding. Accordingly, the Corps of Engineers curtailed water release from the Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River in Montana to minimize downstream ice buildup. However, General Pick remarked, "There are just two things the Lord hasn't told us. They are what he's going to do, and when he's going to do it."

Although major flooding on the

Missouri did not materialize, some tributaries caused minor problems. In the Chadron area, the White River flooded at the end of February and early March. The Raben family from near Crawford made a dinner outing to Chadron in their brand-new automobile, although the White River was rising rapidly. When they were ready to go home the road was impassable, and what would normally have been a thirty-minute journey ended up as a seven-hour

Albion. Although there were ice jams and some flooding in the upper reaches of the Elkhorn River, a study of the snow pack in and around shelterbelts in Holt County led Bob Hill of the Soil Conservation Service in O'Neill to conclude that shelterbelts had greatly eased the flood potential.

Nebraskans outside the blizzard area also experienced the effects of the hard winter. Snow melt and ice blockage contributed to late February flooding



By the first week of April 1949, Ben Feulberth of rural Pierce County wanted to disc cornstalks, but first he had to call in Ed Huey's wrecker from Osmond to pull the disc out of a snow bank fifty feet long and five feet deep. NSHS-RG3139-70

roundabout odyssey "through water, ice and mud" via Hot Springs, South Dakota.

However, gradual melting and the fact that the ground had not frozen in areas covered by the heavy snowfall from the November storm eased the situation. There were minor floods and ice jams along the Niobrara and Middle Loup rivers. For a time in early March, the Union Pacific and Chicago and North Western branch lines were the only surface routes in and out of Albion as mud and snowmelt brought a halt to road travel. Bob Logsdon, a Boone County employee, was killed and three other men were injured while dynamiting an ice jam on the Beaver River near

along the lower reaches of the Big and Little Nemaha rivers. An estimated 15,500 acres were flooded in the Salem, Falls City, and Rulo areas, and major damage to bridges occurred in Richardson County. In early March, floodwaters hit the Seward, Crete and Beatrice areas on the Big Blue River.

A storm on March 24 brought eight inches of snow to Sidney, and people in the Ogallala area welcomed a mixture of rain and snow as a blessing for winter wheat. But winter was not over. At her ranch home near Inman, Lois Tompkins recorded in her diary that Wednesday, March 30, was an "Awful day. Snowed all day & night. About 18 in. on ground. . . . No school and phone out."

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The March 30-31 storm left a path of heavy, wet snow from southwestern to northeastern Nebraska. McCook recorded thirteen inches, and the Hayes Center area reported depths of nineteen to twenty-three inches with winds reaching sixty miles per hour, piling up drifts from five to fifteen feet high. North Platte received fifteen inches, and the Springview area twelve to sixteen inches. Drifts, sometimes twelve feet deep, blocked Holt County roads. From the Sybrant area southeast of Bassett came word that the storm "left a good 23 inches of wet snow." Between Bassett and Long Pine drifts stopped a Chicago and North Western freight train, and three cars derailed.

This latest onslaught brought electricity and telephone outages reminiscent of November. The Springview paper called it the worst storm since early January. Near Atkinson, brothers Adam and Paul Dohman, ages 68 and 66, died while tending calves. According to the Weather Bureau, this blow did some \$500,000 in damage around North Platte. The late season snow melted quickly, causing new flooding on the Elkhorn River, and mud brought a re-emergence of the all-too-familiar road travel problems. "To town with tractor & trailer," remarked Lois Tompkins on Saturday, April 2, "All roads impassable for cars. Streets awful. Our barnyard awful. We sink through snow into water."

This day brought another insight into Plains life from the Niobrara River country south of Springview. In the words of the local newspaper, "Every man along the river went to Riverview Saturday with their tractors, jeeps and on horseback to take their produce and to get groceries. Also to meet the assessor, Duane Cook."¹⁰

On April 14, winter made its last stand, as sleet and snow hit south-central Nebraska and points east. Twelve inches of snow fell at Gibbon, east of Kearney, and the wet snow and ice disrupted telephone service. Spring brought good pastures, but reminders of the long winter lingered. In the third week of April, motorists on U.S. 183 at



The August Hennig farm near Pender, Thurston County. The winter of 1948-49 placed the hardships of rural life in bold relief. Even routine tasks such as keeping a path open between the house and the barn took extra effort and sapped both physical and emotional strength. NSHS-RG3139-21

one point in southern Rock County were forced to detour through a pasture because "several feet of water" still covered the highway. Well into May, a family in that area found enough snow to freeze two batches of ice cream. In the protection of a few shelterbelts in Antelope County, where drifts had once reached upwards of thirty feet, it was nearly June 1 before the last patches of snow were gone.¹¹

On April 1, Lois Tompkins noted in her diary, "Have had 90 in. of snow this winter," and similar reports came from other parts of north-central Nebraska. Bassett, on the fringe of the November storm, had a total snowfall of nearly seventy-nine inches; in southern Rock County snowfall from autumn through spring was estimated at 105 to 112 inches.

The mere recitation of such numbers suggests that the arrival of spring in 1949 must have brought particular joy to

Nebraskans. At Gordon, young people roared about town in their automobiles, a pastime marked by "raucous horn tootings," reported the *Gordon Journal*. On a more pastoral note, a Springview area resident noted "It is a beautiful drive now along the Niobrara River with its green fields, alfalfa, and all kinds of wild flower and the lilac bushes covered with bloom."

It is probably impossible to give an accurate monetary cost figure for the winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska. According to data received in the governor's office in July 1949, the total expense for "snow removal" was \$11,104,750. Of this sum, cities and counties spent \$1,865,500 and the Nebraska Department of Roads and Irrigation spent \$1,239,250, four times the previous record cost. The remaining \$8,000,000 was the contribution of the U.S. government.¹²

A 1994 *Sunday World-Herald* (Omaha) article on the state's costliest natural

disasters, reported “published estimates at the time put the losses at \$42 million—\$259.8 million in 1994 dollars.” If the \$42 million figure—about \$324.7 million in 2003 dollars—is reasonably valid, and allowing for inflation, the winter of 1948–49 was one of the costliest natural events in the state’s history.

Data on weather-related fatalities in Nebraska during the winter of 1948–49 is also uncertain. The Dunlap man who was killed in a bulldozer mishap on February 4 was then reported to have been the state’s twenty-fourth weather-related fatality, but other storm-related deaths followed. According to a later American Red Cross report fourteen people died in Nebraska from storm-related causes in the early months of 1949. Adding the six fatalities arising from the November 1948 storm brings the total to twenty deaths for the winter, a more conservative figure. The Red Cross reported that 404 people suffered storm-related injuries.¹¹³ But as dangerous as a Plains winter can be, it is noteworthy that while the great January blizzard was pounding the region, a news headline proclaimed “Southern Twisters Kill 47,” referring to tornadoes in Arkansas and Louisiana.¹¹⁴

The seemingly endless winter of 1948–49 placed the hardships of rural life in bold relief. For example, adverse weather interfered with routine household tasks such as doing the laundry. With only enough fuel oil to operate one stove in the dining room, this was a particular challenge at the Moody family ranch north of Crawford. As Jeanette Moody Parsons recalled,

Dad brought in enough snow every 10 days or so to melt and heat to be used to do the laundry. He rigged a rope clothesline in the living room in order for the clothes to dry. It took many hours with no source of heat in the room.

A woman in the Ord and Burwell area gave her perspective in an unsigned essay in the *Burwell Tribune*, “Snowbound Musings of a Rancher’s

Wife.” After discussing the awful trek to the outhouse, the isolation, the hungry cattle that might wander away over buried fences, she noted the stress that the situation had placed upon individuals and upon family relationships. “Wives know when their husbands act grumpy, cross, and make sharp retorts that they are only overworked, overworried individuals, with dreams dying inside them.”

Meeting the winter’s hardships also probably blurred traditional rural gender roles. Near Amelia, Holt County, Mrs. Leon Thompson helped her husband shovel snow from haystacks. Joe and Lillian Urbanovsky, about sixty-two and fifty years of age, with no children, lived north of Hemingford. On February 19, Mrs. Urbanovsky wrote:

I worked right along with Joe every day as he could not possibly stand it alone. It was too much for us both. Joe and I both lost lots of weight through this struggle and worry, as we do have a nice bunch of cows and we were so afraid of losing them.

To reach their haystacks and get feed for their cattle, the Urbanovskys wrestled large logs from the snow, dragged them on foot, with ropes, to a place where they could move them with their tractor. They then made a sled with board flooring with which to make the half-mile trek to the stacks and, as Mrs. Urbanovsky put it, “away we went after some feed.” She added,

We have been doing that for almost a month now, as we could only haul some days as it would blow and be blizzarding almost every other day, so it was tough going. I was out working and feeding, scooping and everything else at 24 below zero.

My eyes froze many times[.] So did Joe’s. We would work a while, go in the house, warm up and go out again. I was going to take some pictures of these 20 foot snow banks we have here all over the place. But I haven’t got around to it yet.¹¹⁵

For Charles “Skinny” and Lois Imm the winter on their ranch between Spalding and Bartlett was a long ordeal. As a relative, Jo Eberly, now of Lincoln, recalled,

Their mail was delivered by small plane. Their cattle scattered everywhere because the snow drifted over their fence lines. At times the only feed was treetops and then the trees were under snow . . . Lois made the best of what she had but it was a terrible stress on the entire family. I don’t think my Uncle Skinny ever got over the humbling experience.

In January, when the local school ran out of heating oil, classes were moved to the Imm residence, but in time the Imms exhausted their fuel supply. Somehow, their plight was discovered, and one evening, Spalding oil dealer Oliver Cox, accompanied by three helpers, drove his fuel truck “under great difficulties,” including much shoveling, to within half a mile of the Imm’s lane. Charles Imm with a team of horses helped the truck get as far as his lane where he had brought out his oil tank on skids. It was 5:00 A.M. when Cox and his crew finally got back to town.

When Imm’s daughter, Sandra, a high school student in Bartlett, became ill, contacting the family was an involved task. An amateur radio operator in Bartlett reached an operator in Omaha, who then telephoned the message to Elgin. An airplane from Elgin flew to the Imm home, picked up Lois, then flew to Bartlett to pick up Sandra, and took her to the Spalding hospital. She recovered in a few days and was flown home. This episode, an amalgam of frontier-like isolation and modern space-vanquishing technology, epitomized the amazing contrasts of life in the blizzard area.

Some people coped with the stress and physical hardship of this arduous winter better than others, but one great lesson of the winter was the value of preparedness and adaptation to the Plains environment.¹¹⁶

Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska



A romantic greeting-card image in other circumstances, a horse-drawn wagon became a necessity—and yet one more inconvenience—for the August Hennig family of rural Thurston County during the seemingly endless winter of 1948-49. NSHS-RG3139-23

Evidence suggested that farmers and ranchers with well-placed shelterbelts and windbreaks avoided some of the problem of drifting snow. However, the huge snowdrifts wrought much damage upon existing shelterbelts, indicating the value of placing evergreens on the outside rows of new plantings.¹¹⁷

W. W. Derrick, a beef cattle specialist at the University of Nebraska College of Agriculture, concluded that experience had made older ranchers more mindful of winter's perils than their younger

counterparts. Professor Derrick also and generally had lower livestock losses.

As James E. Lawrence, editor of the *Lincoln Star*, and others noted, hay often was unavailable to cattle because stockmen left their hay in windrows, rather than stacking it, a practice that avoided the labor and cost of stacking. But those who gambled on a mild winter and left their hay in windrows on the ground lost in 1948-49. Lawrence contended, "The older and large operator was not caught in this fashion generally."

In February, Nebraska Agriculture Director Rufus Howard had said that livestock losses came to some 3.5 percent in the fifteen most severely afflicted counties. Although losses varied widely and were highly localized, in general they do not seem to have exceeded Howard's figure. The worst numerical loss reported was more than thirteen thousand sheep in Kimball County. Neighboring Cheyenne County also had high sheep mortality. Cattle losses in those two southern Panhandle counties were light. The worst cattle losses seem to have been in Morrill and Sioux counties, where an estimated 5 percent of the stock perished in the January storms.

William R. Main, extension agent in Garden County, found that small-scale cattlemen willingly reported losses, but the big cattlemen did not want to reveal that information. By contacting ranch foremen and other workers, Main pieced together data suggesting that storm mortality in Garden County was 2 to 3 percent. The spring calf crop was poor in Garden County, but neighboring Morrill County had an "exceptionally good" calf crop, given the hard winter.

Bloat, a sometimes-fatal condition that arises in ruminants when fermentation gasses cannot escape the digestive system, sometimes became a problem when starving animals at last had access to feed. Cattle also sometimes suffered from exposure, and afflictions including blindness and frozen scrotums were reported. Weight loss and extraordinary feed requirements also were a significant expense for cattlemen.¹¹⁸

Extraordinary livestock mortality may have been the result of poor management or negligence. The huge loss of sheep in Kimball County, for example, may have occurred because the stockman—apparently a nonresident who was grazing the animals in the county—did not provide proper shelter or adequate supplemental feed.¹¹⁹

Good planning—and good luck—undoubtedly helped some operators, as Irene Westover in western Cherry County implied in her diary entry five

weeks after the storm:

Now that we have been out and around and had a chance to talk with other people and hear how bad this storm was and how deep some people's buildings were covered with snow, we are beginning to realize that we were unusually lucky in having good hills for protection and good windbreaks of trees to stop the snow too. Also [we had] hay and water that we could get to altho' part of the time we must shovel snow to get it. Our place must have been ideally located for that storm.

Bob and Stan Moreland worked strenuously to care for the livestock on their ranch near Merriman. Bob concluded, "We were lucky that our cattle happened to be close to home where we had hills and a big cottonwood grove on the north and quite a bit of man-made shelter. We had water available in the corrals and not as many cattle to worry about as most of our neighbors."

Indeed, proximity of livestock to feed, water, and shelter was critical. Neil Becker, then a farm youth near McLean, Pierce County, recalled that their livestock had shelter in a large barn well stocked with feed, but keeping the animals supplied with water was a challenge. Rachel Greenfield, on a ranch east of Newport, Rock County, noted that their small herd of cattle had ample shelter, including a corral and a cedar grove. Stacked hay was readily available, and her husband used a sled drawn by three horses to bring in hay.

Of course, fortune is a two-edged sword. Although cattle sometimes crossed fences buried under hard drifts, uncovered fences could be death traps for animals drifting with the wind. Such was the experience of a neighbor of the Morelands who lost calves during the January blizzard.¹²⁰

At the Raben family farm north of Crawford, a horse died by falling into the White River. The Cerny family near Rushville worried about cows that could not be milked, but when they dug out they found their livestock generally had

fared well, but "2 or 3 market size hogs had smothered to death." Road clearing in the Hemingford area revealed one operator's loss of eighty-three hogs.

The late March snowstorms, like such storms in any year, were a menace at calving time, and southwestern Cherry County reported very high calf mortality.¹²¹

The innate hardiness of livestock was crucial to enduring the winter. Many Brahma cattle, their genetic roots in India and Brazil, perished in Lincoln County, but cattle breeds traditional to the area were much more likely to survive.¹²²

The January blizzard proved less devastating to livestock than might have been the case, but the snow, ice, and bitter cold brought horrible examples of suffering and death that mere statistics do not convey. In the Sandhills near Alliance and Antioch, cattle drifted onto frozen lakes, lost their footing, and died struggling on the ice. Photographs of the animals are a dreadful portrait of the tragedy of this exceptional winter.¹²³

The effects of the winter on Nebraska's 1949 wheat crop were varied. Despite the heavy snowfall, fields in the southern



A note on the back of this photograph from the C. H. Greenwood ranch near Whiteclay, Sheridan County, reads, "Our cattle taken on Wed. after they had been trapped in a small gulch since Sun. Was snowing very hard when this was taken." NSHS-RG3139-45

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Near Ashby, Grant County, about 150 head of Hereford cattle drifting with the wind wandered onto a frozen lake. Unable to stand on the wind- and snow-polished ice, they fell and froze to death.
NSHS-RG3139-117

Panhandle blew dry, leaving wheat subject to winterkill and the land prone to erosion. In the northern Panhandle the wheat crop benefited from snow remaining on the fields. In some eastern counties outside the blizzard area, heavy ice cover in late January may have affected the wheat, but subsequent thawing followed by a sudden return of low temperatures probably was more responsible for reduced yields.¹²⁴

The heavy snowmelt brought good soil moisture, an obvious benefit for crops, hay production, and gardens in 1949. However, in some areas, the ground had not frozen before the heavy insulating snows came, apparently allowing insect larvae and eggs to survive, leading to a bountiful supply of agricultural pests the following summer.¹²⁵

The emergency brought stories not only of heroism and selflessness, but also of mean and selfish behavior. Frank Bataillon, a resident worker at the Sioux Ordnance Depot near Sidney, recalled that the proprietor of the small store at the depot tried to charge for some

of the milk that military aircraft had dropped in the wake of the great January storm. Residents became understandably angered, and in a short time the proprietor departed. It was probably no surprise that when the bulldozers of Operation Snowbound came to an area, some rural residents clamored for preference in being dug out. The military, wishing to avoid favoritism, insisted that anyone in need of clearing work go through "proper channels"—the local civilian disaster organization.¹²⁶

However, such conduct appears to have been insignificant compared to the overall spirit of helpfulness that pervaded the state, and sharing a common experience fostered concern for other people's welfare. In an era when not all rural people had telephones or when those phones might not be working, Ann Van Hoff remembered that Verdigre townspeople organized treks to the countryside to check on the well-being of people who had not seen or contacted lately.

To the west in the Sandhills, Brewster area resident Mrs. Dan Norris remarked, "We are daily impressed by the neigh-

borliness and kind spirit of these people in these hills who will do anything to help a neighbor in distress." Indeed, a common courtesy among those who could get to town for supplies was to bring back necessities for neighbors who could not get out. "When a farmer was able to make it into town," said the Elsie news correspondent, "he would take several of his neighbors' mail with him, which was very much appreciated by all." In mid-February, Ernest Lanz, who had not been to town in eight weeks, wrote to the *Rock County Leader*, "I don't know what we would have done if you good people in Bassett hadn't come to our aid as we were out of groceries, fuel and feed . . . Please accept my thanks . . . We will never forget your kindness."

The winter of 1948-49 also was a media event, the emergency situation and the bizarre aspects of the weather providing excellent material for newspaper stories. In early February, Alliance hotels were packed with reporters, print and newsreel photographers, and technicians. A *Life* magazine "Picture

of the Week” featured the snow-covered Alliance airport. Nebraska did not yet have television, but images of its snow-bound landscape flashed on TV screens in parts of the country that were in the vanguard of the new medium.

Because the winter of 1948–49 blocked railroads, highways, and other roads, disrupted communication, jeopardized agriculture, isolated people, and impaired commerce, it offers a means for understanding the web of activities that characterized life in mid-twentieth century rural and small-town Nebraska, and reflecting on those details can help us see how key aspects of daily life changed in half a century.

For the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, the Chicago and North Western, and the Union Pacific railroads, and other lines serving blizzard-stricken areas of the West, the seven weeks from the first of January through the third week of February brought monumental challenges. Despite problems on the main line between Sidney and Cheyenne in the first week of January and the death of a crewman working to open its Stapleton branch, the difficulties facing the Union Pacific in Nebraska were less obvious than those confronting the Burlington and North Western lines. But that appearance is deceiving, for in the month and a half after the early January storm, the Union Pacific with its operational headquarters in Omaha faced severe challenges in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming from repeated blizzards and drifting snow. The company later described this period as “the most trying and difficult seven weeks ever experienced by the Union Pacific Railroad in its eighty year history since the driving of the Golden Spike.” These problems were at their worst in the second and third weeks of February on the main line in the Laramie, Rawlins, and Rock Springs areas of Wyoming.¹²⁷

Across the Union Pacific system, some fourteen thousand employees took part in this battle, and in addition to the Nebraska fatality, three workers



C. H. Greenwood of rural Whiteclay, Sheridan County, dug a polled Hereford out of a fifteen-foot drift. Livestock losses averaged 3.5 percent in the fifteen most severely affected counties. The worst losses, about 5 percent, were in Morrill and Sioux counties. NSHS-RG3139-43

died in Utah and one in Wyoming.¹²⁸ The company’s concern for the safety, comfort, and convenience of delayed and stranded passengers is evident in the internal memoranda written by personnel who rode trains and reported on service. Such high quality service would bring envy to many air travelers of more recent times.¹²⁹

The Union Pacific estimated its total weather-related expenses at seven million dollars, and its revenue loss at an additional ten million. By the winter of 1948–49, George F. Ashby’s presidency of the railroad was becoming insecure, and storm-related problems probably contributed to his retirement in February.¹³⁰

Many miles of railroad track have

been pulled up since 1949 as the trend toward highway transport—already well along at midcentury—continues. One need only drive along U.S. Highway 20 parallel to the former Chicago and North Western line across northern Nebraska, now being developed as a hike-bike trail, to see evidence of the drastic decline in rail service. Since the opening of the Oregon Trail, Nebraska has been on the route to elsewhere, but the Kimball sojourn of the snowbound passengers of the Union Pacific’s *City of San Francisco* is a reminder that for generations trans-continental travelers could not avoid Nebraska and the Plains region.

At midcentury most Americans still traveled across the country by surface transportation, and the Union Pacific

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route and the adjoining U.S. Highway 30, both crossing almost the full length of Nebraska, comprised the nation's corridor. The next generation brought the development of the Interstate Highway system, including I-80 through Nebraska—again emphasizing the state's central role in the nation's surface transportation.

Today, however, only freight trains rumble along the main line of the Union Pacific between Sidney and Cheyenne, where the great blizzard of 1949 stalled famous passenger trains like the *City of San Francisco*. Tremendous increases in air travel and the near demise of transcontinental passenger rail service created an image of Nebraska and much of the Midwest and Great Plains regions as "flyover land."¹³¹

Speedier transportation, both air and ground, and the opportunity for Americans to gain more cosmopolitan perspectives on the various parts of their country have not necessarily made Nebraska a better known place. The curious stories of prominent New Yorkers snowbound in Kimball, Nebraska, unlikely in 1949, would be virtually inconceivable two generations later. A snowbound transcontinental air traveler in a later time would find a dull but comfortable refuge at a terminal in Chicago, Denver, or Omaha, but would not come away with memories of the kindly people in a small town.

The rural population of the blizzard area—like the rural population elsewhere in the state and region—has dropped markedly over five decades. Understandably, rural residents traditionally have borne the brunt of severe winters in the central and northern Great Plains, and the core of Nebraska's blizzard-stricken area in 1949 was not only rural, but included the state's most lightly populated counties. According to the 1950 census, the total population of the twenty-nine counties for which a state of emergency had been declared was 195,364. The 2000 census enumerated only 149,988 people in the area. The loss of 45,376 residents represented

more than 23 percent of the mid-twentieth century population of a large portion of the state.

The twenty-nine counties covered 37,734 square miles—just over 49 percent of the state's total area. At the end of the century, as in 1949, the largest towns were North Platte, Alliance, and Chadron. The 2000 census revealed that Nebraska's average population density was 22.3 persons per square mile, but fourteen of the twenty-nine counties in the 1949 blizzard core area had population densities of less than two persons per square mile in 2000.¹³²

In 1949, an infrastructure of neighbors, country schools and their teachers, townspeople, county commissioners, disaster relief committees, Red Cross chapters, county extension agents, service organizations, and local pilots helped rural Nebraskans cope with winter's onslaughts. The cooperation of individuals and institutions reaching through the county, its townships, hamlets, villages, and towns was essential to the work of Operation Snowbound and other external sources of relief.

At the end of the century, agriculture and allied industries remained basic to Nebraska's livelihood, but the "family farm" and agriculture as a "way of life" are far less evident than at midcentury. The infrastructure of rural society has endured, but population decline and the attendant economic and political realities pose a growing challenge for maintaining essential services and the amenities of life for a small number of people spread over a vast landscape. If a wide-area emergency like the winter of 1948–49 were to occur again, a solid social infrastructure in rural areas would be critical.

To some extent, technology is answering the challenges. Travel to and from literally thousands of rural schools was a key part of life's routine in the Nebraska countryside at midcentury. For good and ill, school consolidation, which was barely underway in 1948–49, would in the coming decades signifi-

cantly erode localism in education. Whatever the benefits of school consolidation, however, challenges for education—environmental and, especially, spatial—in the lightly populated areas of the Plains have not vanished. Perhaps, however, the use of the telephone for giving class assignments to some rural students in snowbound areas in 1949 heralded the use of vastly more sophisticated electronic technology to reduce similar environmental problems in the twenty-first century.¹³³

Although many Nebraska farms and ranches still lacked centrally supplied electric power in 1948, the November storm revealed a negative side of technological progress to some rural people who had electrical service. Heralding the future were the discomfort and inconveniences that rural power outages brought to some Grant County residents. At the same time, F. M. Weitzel, who wrote a weather column for the *Albion News*, noted that an elderly farmer told him, "We live too easy, just have to turn a button or push a switch." Of course, the power outages arising from the November storm brought inconvenience and discomfort to many townspeople, too, and Weitzel stressed the dependence of modern society upon technology, especially electricity.¹³⁴

In the years following the winter of 1948–49 came the completion of rural electrification and a deepening reliance of all Americans upon electrical service. Rural people became even more dependent upon centrally generated electricity than are town and city folk. Today, power outages pose problems for many rural Nebraskans that were nonexistent in 1948–49. Neil Becker, who lived on a Pierce County farm that did not yet have electricity, recalled that his family had a battery-powered radio and relied upon Stations WJAG in Norfolk and WNAX in Yankton for weather information. Looking back on his experiences in rural Custer County in January 1949, Harold George said, "The major plumbing item was the out-house and it worked fine as long as the

door was scooped out. The radio was battery operated and we got along with that. As a result we were not terribly inconvenienced." Today the heavy reliance on a steady electrical supply requires that many farmers and ranchers have back-up generators, and because of the consequences of electrical outages, Olive Raben, who lived near Crawford in 1948–49, said that getting rid of windmills has been unfortunate.

Indeed, time would reveal the perils of a major long-term electrical outage for Nebraska agriculture. One of the most dramatic changes in the state in the second half of the twentieth century was the westward thrust of the Corn Belt into semi-arid regions, a movement made possible by massive pumping of groundwater through center-pivot irrigation systems. Some pumps ran on diesel fuel, natural gas, or propane, but by the 1990s about a third were electric.

The storms of November 18–19, 1948, and March 30–31, 1949, had shown the damage to a power system that heavy, wet snow and ice from wind-driven autumn and spring storms could do. On April 11, 1994, such a storm left a trail of broken poles and downed wires across twenty-one counties from southwestern to central Nebraska. Within nine days, electrical service to towns was fully restored, but the task of installing thousands of poles before the beginning of the irrigation season was a major challenge for utilities.¹³⁵

Although telephone service in remote rural areas was more common than centrally supplied electricity in 1949, it still had not reached some farm and ranch homes in the Plains. As with electricity, the lack of phone service pointed to a lingering, albeit dwindling, disparity in the conveniences shared by urban and rural people. More immediately important, the lack of telephones in some locales added to the problem of ascertaining the welfare of snowbound families. For those who had telephones, outages could be a problem.

Two sisters who lived on a farm eight miles from Albion endured about two

and a half weeks of isolation in December and January. During much of this time, their telephone was inoperative, and when neighbors reached them, they were short of fuel and food. The experience led them to 1948–49 their last winter in the countryside.¹³⁶

Of course, leaving a rural home was not an option for many families, and they took downed telephone lines and other challenges more in stride. Probably exceptional even then was the situation in Perkins County where in mid-February local men restored a phone line to service that the news correspondent for Woodson Precinct matter-of-factly declared "had been broken since harvest time."

Radio broadcasts, subject to the limitations of power supply and severe interference, which occurred during the big January storm, provided essential information to snow-blocked rural people and probably helped ease their sense of isolation. Although two-way radio communication was much less common than in later years, it was helpful in relief activities. Byron Appleby, an aviator from Blair, was a key figure in relief work around Bassett, and using a radio in his airplane he communicated to a radio-equipped pickup truck to direct fuel delivery vehicles to bulldozer-cleared roads. By the end of the twentieth century the widespread use of cellular telephones would become extremely important as people coped with distance, the great denominator of the Plains environment.

Mid-twentieth century rural Nebraskans were more than a generation into the transition from horses to tractors powered by gasoline engines, but the winter of 1948–49 revealed that the newer motive power was not always better. This point was well made in February, when Bassett newspaper publisher Clifford Buckendorf wrote, "Lots of ranchers have sold all or nearly all of their horses, and are depending solely on tractors and hay sleds, and of course they don't work too hot in 30 inches of snow." Since midcentury,

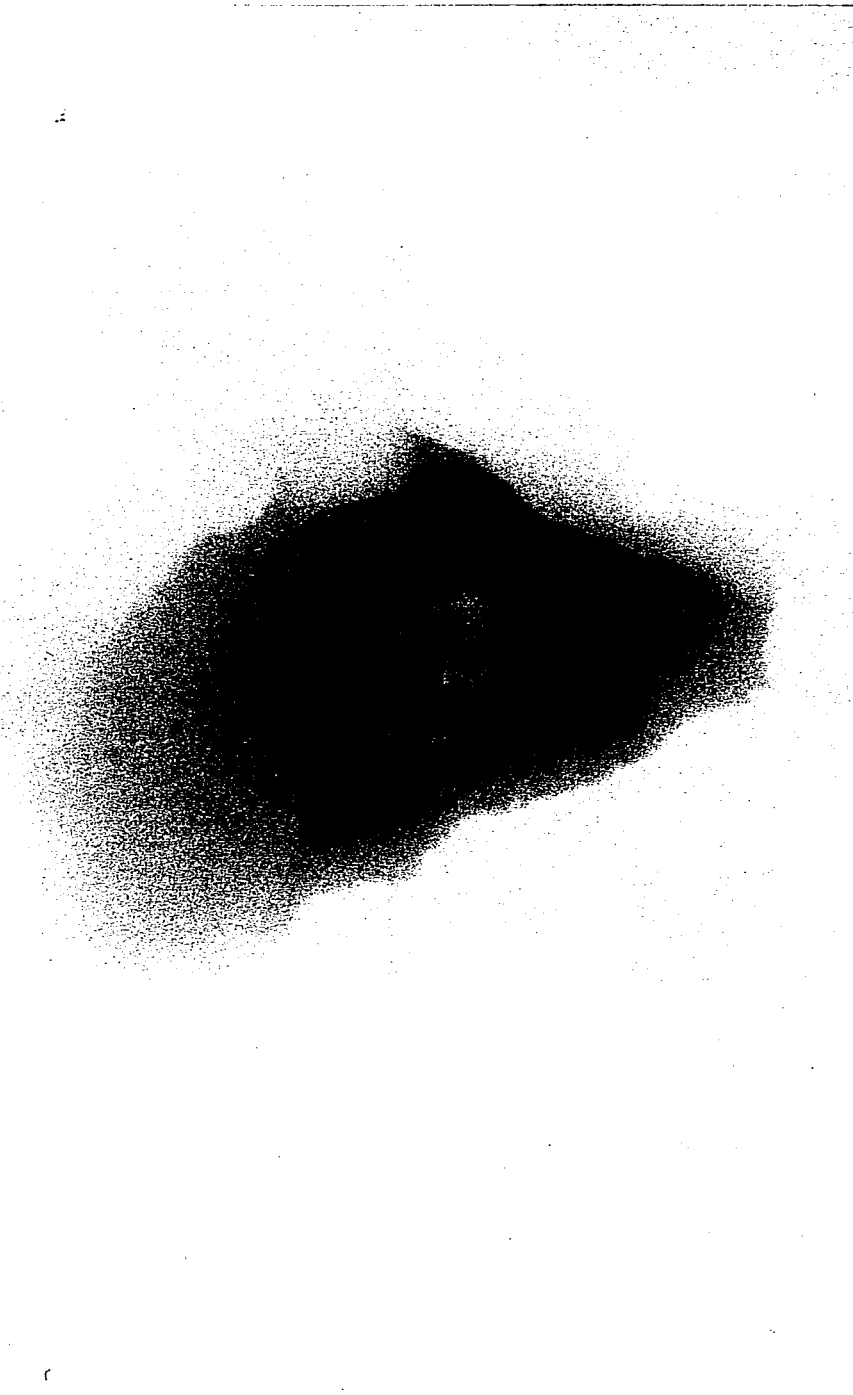
more powerful tractors with heated cabs and snow-clearing equipment have eased that burden, and advances in weather forecasting have given rural people more time to prepare for winter storms. Better road maintenance equipment and more surfaced roads also have been a boon to travelers in rural Nebraska. So, too, have been better-graded highways. In evaluating Operation Snowbound, the Fifth Army report noted, "Where the surface of the road was at an elevation above that of the adjacent fields and subject to wind erosion the surface was usually covered with little or no snow."¹³⁷

Reflecting upon farm life near Crawford in 1949, Mrs. Olive Raben said, "Our road . . . was just gravel and not well elevated as it is now. That is why it filled up so bad."

The use of Jeeps in the blizzard region in 1949 heralded the traction advantages of four-wheel-drive and front-wheel-drive vehicles, which in time became common.¹³⁸ Operation Snowbound's use of Weasels demonstrated the value of tracked vehicles in deep snow. In early February, Consumers Public Power District approved the acquisition of two Weasels for use in power line inspection and repair. By that time, Consumers also was using a snowmobile, and in the Whitman area the Monahan Cattle Company had acquired such a vehicle. However, the snowmobiles so familiar in later generations would not become common until the 1960s.

Toward the end of the emergency period, an Ainsworth flyer looking for distress signals near Brownlee in southeastern Cherry County saw a man waving urgently. When he landed, the rancher offered to buy the new ski-equipped plane and told the pilot that he had just bought a bulldozer. As the rancher said, "I'm never going to be snowbound again." Either a 1949 vintage map—or a contemporary one—will help a reader unfamiliar with the area understand the isolation of the north-central portions of the state that

Winter of 1948-49 in Nebraska



The haunting image of Lois Boerger, peering out of the tunnel she dug to the back door after climbing out an attic window to escape the drift-buried house, suggests the courage and self-sufficiency with which most Nebraskans met the challenges of the 1948-49 winter. Herman Boerger ranch near Rose, Rock County. Courtesy of Rachel Greenfield, Omaha

bore the brunt of the 1948-49 winter, and the rancher's new-found enthusiasm for such equipment. Probably most people's decision to upgrade their machinery was less dramatic, but the episode illustrates the ongoing adjustment of Plains residents to their environment.

Social and economic changes have made rural people more dependent on routine travel, and in this respect more vulnerable to winter weather. More rural people have town jobs than was the case in 1948-49, and ranch homes in more recent times are likely to be less self-sufficient than a typical farmstead at midcentury, which had milk cows and chickens. Laying in a winter's supply of home-canned goods seems much less the practice than at midcentury, but rural people with town jobs may prefer an array of frozen convenience foods, most of which were not available in 1949. As Olive Raben said, "Women don't can like they did . . . I used to put up 700 to 800 quarts of stuff, now many of them don't can a thing. Many do not even have gardens. In other words they would not be as self-sufficient as we were."¹³⁹

As Frederick C. Luebke wrote in an outstanding essay on Nebraska's development, "How a people responds to stress is the stuff of history."¹⁴⁰ Clearly, the response of Nebraskans, other Plains residents, and the people who helped them meet the challenge of the winter of 1948-49 was exemplary. Looking back over half a century, it is clear that technological advances have created a measure of convenience, comfort, and safety that make enduring an exceptionally hard winter much less an ordeal than in 1948-49. Yet the depopulation of rural Plains country and the urbanization of rural life have brought a vulnerability to protracted severe winter weather that was far less evident in 1948-49. Environmental adaptation is a continuing process, and the story of the winter of 1948-49 raises this question: Faced with a similar situation, how well would present-day Nebraskans fare?¹⁴¹

Notes

¹ From November 1948 through March 1949, Nebraska and regional newspapers gave extensive coverage to the succession of winter storms, their consequences, and the experiences of people in their coverage areas. I have depended heavily on them for information about local conditions and events. In addition to standard news stories, the rural neighborhood columns in weekly newspapers provided valuable details and perspectives on the local impact of the winter. All the Nebraska newspapers are in the microfilm collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Most references to and brief quotations from the following newspapers have been woven into the article's narrative, and are not individually cited: *Ainsworth Star-Journal*, *Albion News*, *Alliance Times and Herald*, *Burwell Tribune*, *Chadron Record*, *Cherry County News* (Valentine), *Gordon Journal*, *Harrison Sun*, *Holt County Independent* (O'Neill), *Hooker County Tribune* (Mullen), *McCook Daily Gazette*, *Morning World-Herald* (Omaha), *Sunday World-Herald* (Omaha), *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), *Rock County Leader* (Bassett), *Sargent Leader*, *Sheridan County Star* (Rushville), *Spalding Enterprise*, *Springview Herald*, *Sunday Journal and Star* (Lincoln), *The Monitor* (Bloomfield), *The Telegraph* (Sidney), *Thomas County Herald-Clipper* (Thedford), *Tribune-Sentinel* (Grant), and the *Western Nebraska Observer* (Kimball).

I also made limited use of the following newspapers: *Daily Argus Leader* (Sioux Falls, S. Dak.), *Edgemont Tribune* (Edgemont, S. Dak.), *Duluth News-Tribune*, (Duluth, Minn.), and the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* (Minneapolis, Minn.).

A copy of the unedited version of this work containing complete newspaper citations is available at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

² John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life On The Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 97, 201, 222; R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815–1840* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1950 [1978 reissue]) vol. 1, 201–02; John E. Miller, *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 12; O. E. Rolvaag, *Giants In The Earth* (New York: Harper Torchbook edition, 1964), 426ff.; W. H. O'Gara comp., and Ora A. Clement ed., *In All Its Fury: A History Of The Blizzard Of January 12, 1888* (Lincoln: J&L Lee Books, 1988 reprint).

³ The following individuals provided information and recollections from the 1948–49 storms through in-person and telephone interviews, letters, and written accounts. Their contributions have been woven through the article to provide factual background, first-person experience, and descriptions of conditions. The sources of direct quotes and any paraphrased material that expresses unique perspectives are identified in the text. The specific sources for examples of broadly

held views and brief references are not identified. In neither case are the sources individually cited: interview by author with Frank Bataillon and Jean Bataillon, Hamburg, Iowa, Feb. 1, 1992; Interview by author with Neil Becker, at his home, Omaha, Apr. 9, 1999; Robert W. Buchan, Rushville, Nebr., to author, enclosing "Some Memories of the 1949 Blizzard," Jan. 20, 1992; Richmond B. Case, Annandale, Va., to author, Jan. 18, 1992; Carroll D. Cerny to author, Jan. 29, 1992; Patricia L. Coble, Alliance, to author, May 1, 1992 enclosing letter from Mrs. J. H. Urbanovsky to Mrs. Frank R. Molacek, *Colfax County Call* (Schuyler), Feb. 24, 1949; Jo Eberly, Lincoln, Nebr., to author, Dec. 16, 1991, Jan. 1, 1992; Harold George, Dixon, Nebr., to author, Dec. 8, 1991; interview by author with Rachel Greenfield, Jan. 8, 1992; Art Henrickson to author, April 11, 1992, enclosing "Storms Spread Death Through Midwest," *Life* 26 (Jan. 17, 1949), 21–25; interview by author with Col. Don E. Kahley, USAF (Ret.), San Diego, Calif., Mar. 25, 1988; Linelle Tompkins Kelley, Inman, Nebr., to author, Feb. 6, 1992; Bob Moreland, Merriman, Nebr., "1949 Blizzard," (typed recollections dated Mar. 7, 1984, enclosed with letter, Bob Moreland to author); Jeanette Moody Parsons, Northglenn, Colo., to author, Nov. 26, 1991; Margaret Pruss, "Memories of the 1948–1949 Winter" (typescript), courtesy of Margaret Pruss and Lois L. Tompkins, Inman, Nebr.; telephone interview by author with Mrs. Rolland Quintard, Harrison, Nebr., Dec. 2, 1991; Mrs. Rolland Quintard to author, Nov. 22, 1991; Olive Raben, Chadron, Nebr., to author, Dec. 16, 1991; interview by author with Arthur C. Strong, meteorologist in charge, National Weather Service, Omaha, Nebr., May 11, 1990; Helen Swanson to "Everyone," Feb. 19, 1949, courtesy Rachel Greenfield, Omaha; Lois L. Tompkins, "The Blizzards of 1948–49: Excerpts from the diary of Lois L. Tompkins of Tompkins Corners, Inman, Nebraska," enclosed with Tompkins to author, Jan. 28, 1992; Alice Young Compton Tompkins, O'Neill, Nebr., to author, Dec. 15, 1992; Interview by author with Ann Van Hoff, Clarkson College, Omaha, Jan. 22, 1992; Irene Westover, Ashby, Nebr., "The Blizzard, 1949," enclosed with Westover to author, Jan. 16, 1992; Irene Westover to author, Feb. 3, 1992.

⁴ *Sunday Journal and Star* (Lincoln), Dec. 27, 1970, courtesy Ralph A. Medina, Nebraska Civil Defense Agency, Lincoln.

⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data: Nebraska*, Vol. LIII (Nov. 1948), 122, 124–25.

⁶ *Climatological Data: Nebraska* (Nov. 1948), 122 (general summary), 133–35 (Table 5); For more on this storm, see also Wesley Calef, "The Winter of 1948–49 in the Great Plains," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* XL (Dec. 1950), 267–70, and Roy V. Alleman, *Blizzard 1949* (St. Louis: Patrice Press, 1991), 1–11, 106–07.

⁷ *Climatological Data: Nebraska* (Dec., 1948), 142 (general summary), 152–54 (Table 5).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142–45.

⁹ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹¹ Arthur C. Strong, meteorologist in charge, National Weather Service, Omaha, Nebr., May 11, 1990, from newspaper weather maps for Jan. 3–5, 1949. Strong emphasized that other meteorologists making retrospective analyses of the January 1949 blizzard might arrive at a variety of other explanations. For a technical explanation see Fred McMullen, "The Blizzard of 1949," National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration, National Weather Service, Central Region Headquarters, <<http://www.crh.noaa.gov/lbi/pastevents/blizpaper.htm>> (Jan. 29, 2003).

¹² Harl A. Dalstrom and Kay Calamé Dalstrom, "It's Going Down in History": The Blizzards of 1949," *South Dakota History* 29 (Winter 1999), 265, 269, 270. Dean Constanteau, National Weather Service, Valley, Nebr., May 11, 1994, using North American Surface Charts for the period Jan. 2–5, 1949, obtained by author from the National Climatic Data Center, Asheville, N. C., provided another meteorological interpretation of the storm; Strong interview. See also Calef, "The Winter of 1948–49 in the Great Plains," 271–72; Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 190–91.

¹³ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 36–45.

¹⁴ Telegrams, F. W. Charske to G. F. Ashby, Jan. 6; Ashby to Charske, Jan. 7, 1949; letters, E. Roland Harriman to A. J. Seitz and A. Perry Osborn, Feb. 18, 1949, File No. U-8-C-27, Union Pacific Secretary's Office. Union Pacific Museum, Council Bluffs (hereafter cited as UPRR Papers); Maury Klein, *Union Pacific: The Rebirth 1894–1969* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 453.

¹⁵ *Life* 26 (Jan. 17, 1949), 21–25; telegrams, George F. Ashby, Jan. 5, 8, 1949, File No. U-8-C27, "Snow Storm Conditions," UPRR Papers.

¹⁶ For another episode along the Kimball-Scottsbluff highway, see Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 31–32, 69.

¹⁷ Ann Van Hoff, who was a high school student in Verdigré during the winter of 1948–49, also recalled that some rural people in that area had to use their furniture for fuel.

¹⁸ Telephone Report From Henry Eichman, Midwestern Area, 12:15 P.M., Jan. 25, 1949, American National Red Cross, Red Cross Central File, 1947–64 (Group 4), RG 200, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. (Hereafter cited as ARC, NARA-CP. All ARC, NARA-CP materials cited are in Boxes 1681–1683.)

¹⁹ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 17–23.

²⁰ *Edgemont Tribune* (Edgemont, S. Dak.), Jan. 12, 1949.

²¹ *Climatological Data: Nebraska* (Jan., 1949), 14–16 (Table 5).

²² Herbert Eby, State Assistance Field Supervisor, Alliance, to Neil C. Vandemoer, State Assistance

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Director, Report on Indians, by telephone, Jan. 17, 1949, RG 1, Box 60, Folder 627, Papers of Governor Val Peterson, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln. (Hereafter cited as Peterson Papers).

²³ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound, Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, and North Dakota*, 29 Jan.-Mar. 1949, Appendix L-i, document courtesy of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha.

²⁴ Art Auserod to Governor Val Peterson [no date], RG 1, Box 60, Folder 626, Peterson Papers (A typed log of relief activities by private aircraft, Jan. 28-30, 1949, around Bartlett and in neighboring areas).

²⁵ A story in the *Alliance Times and Herald*, Jan. 21, 1949, implied that the youth was flown to Alliance in a military helicopter on Thursday, Jan. 20. This was two days after the date of Quintard's flight as reported in the *Harrison Sun*.

²⁶ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 118-21.

²⁷ For a similar comment about rural people returning from town with supplies for their neighbors, see the *Tribune-Sentinel* (Grant), Jan. 13, 1949.

²⁸ C. H. Dewitt and Keith A. Long, *Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics*, Sheridan [County], State of Nebraska, 1949, 18 (This and other annual reports of county extension work cited cover the period Dec. 1, 1948 to Nov. 30, 1949. These reports are available in the C. Y. Thompson Library, University of Nebraska-Lincoln).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ U.S. Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data: Nebraska*, Vol. LIV (Jan., 1949), 14-16 (Table 5); Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound: Nebraska*, 20.

³¹ Mrs. Marvin Fuller to Val Peterson, Jan. 12, 1949, Box 48, Folder 491, Peterson Papers. A correction line is an east-west jog in a north-south road. Correction lines are used in the rectangular survey system to keep north-south survey lines from converging. Rural roads typically follow survey lines.

³² See also press releases, copies of wires, Val Peterson to W. L. Mueller, General Superintendent, C&NW, and R. L. Williams, President, C&NW, Feb. 3, 1949; R. L. Williams to Peterson, Feb. 3, 1949; W. L. Mueller to Peterson, Feb. 3, 1949, Box 60, Folder 626, Peterson Papers; Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 23-24.

³³ S. L. Fee to Peterson, Feb. 25, 1949 (wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers.

³⁴ 125 S. S. [sic S. L.] Fee to Val Peterson, Jan. 29, 1949, (typed copy, wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers; *Census of Population*, 1950, Nebraska, 27-19 (Table 7); *Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide, Seventy-Sixth Edition* (1945), 245 (map).

³⁵ S. L. Fee to Val Peterson, Feb. 3, 1949 (wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers; *Sargent*

Leader, Feb. 10, 1949.

³⁶ Weaver Cole to Peterson, Jan. 18, 1949 (wire), Peterson to Ralph Budd, President, Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, Sam Fee, General Manager, Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, and Julius Alms, Traffic Manager, Chicago, Burlington and Quincy, Jan. 19, 1949 (typed copies, wires); Ralph Budd to Peterson, Jan. 19, 21, 1949 (wires); S. L. Fee to Peterson, Jan. 18, 1949 (wire); J. J. Alms to Peterson, Jan. 19, 1949; Box 60, Folder 627; Charles L. Cooper to Peterson, Jan. 19, 1949; Willard G. Sheldon to Peterson, Jan. 22, 1949, Box 48, Folder 491, Peterson Papers.

³⁷ S. L. Fee to Peterson, Jan. 18, 1949 (wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers.

³⁸ Memo, phone call from Samuel Fee, Jan. 20, 1948 [sic], attached to S. L. Fee to Peterson, Jan. 20, 1949 (wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers.

³⁹ S. L. Fee to Peterson, Feb. 3, [1949], Box 60, Folder 627, Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers.

⁴⁰ S. S. [sic] Fee to Peterson, Jan. 29, 1949 (typed copy, wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers.

⁴¹ Memorandum, Col. J. S. Seybold to Peterson, Feb. 7, 1949; S. L. Fee to Peterson, Feb. 18, 1949 (wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers; S. L. Fee to Peterson, Feb. 25, 1949 (wire), Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers; also *Sunday Journal and Star*, Feb. 20, 1949.

⁴² See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 132-35.

⁴³ *Holt County Independent*, Feb. 17, 1949. The article is especially good in relating the blizzard experiences of rural teachers.

⁴⁴ Mari Sandoz, *Winter Thunder* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books reprint, 1986). My narrative follows Irene Westover's accounts. Press reports originated with a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers official who led a snow-clearing team that reached the Westover ranch the second week of February. According to his report, Cecilia Sandoz was driving her pupils to school in a school bus when the vehicle was stranded in a drift. She then led the children to the Westover ranch. However, Irene Westover said, "There was no school bus," adding that errors in reporting may have stemmed from the commotion attending the arrival of the relief crew.

⁴⁵ Harl and Kay Dalstrom, "It's Going Down in History," 288-89; Eby, Report on Indians, Jan. 17, 1949, Peterson Papers.

⁴⁶ Eby, Report on Indians, Jan. 17, 1949, Peterson Papers.

⁴⁷ Harl and Kay Dalstrom, "It's Going Down in History," 288-89.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 288.

⁴⁹ L. M. Morgan to Peterson, Jan. 12, 1949 (wire); H. R. Partridge, Disaster Chairman, Box Butte County, to Peterson, Jan. 23, 1949 (wire); Senator Hugh Butler to Peterson, Jan. 24, 1949 (wire); Peterson to C. R. Whitlock, Rosebud, S. Dak.,

Jan. 24, 1949 (wire); [Eugene] O'Sullivan [Member of Congress] to Peterson, Jan. 27, 1949 (wire); Senator Kenneth S. Wherry to Peterson, Jan. 29, 1949 (wire); C. H. Powers, Superintendent, Pine Ridge, S. Dak. to Peterson, Jan. 29, 1949 (wire); Karl Stefan, Member of Congress, to Peterson, Jan. 31, 1949 (wire); Peterson to Julius A. Krug, Secretary of the Interior, Feb. 3, 1949, (wire); Krug to Peterson, Feb. 16, 1949, RG 1, Box 60, Folder 627; Peterson to C. H. Powers, Jan. 28, 1949 (press-release copy of wire), RG 1, Box 60, Folder 626, Peterson Papers.

⁵⁰ Harl and Kay Dalstrom, "It's Going Down in History," 282-92, 309-11, 319-20, 324. See also *Sunday Journal and Star*, Jan. 16.

⁵¹ A. Neil Dawes and Mrs. Viola Damkroger, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Holt County," 1949, 52.

⁵² *Climatological Data: Nebraska* (Jan., 1949, 2 (general summary), 14-16 (Table 5).

⁵³ Monthly Climatological Summary (WB Form 1030), Omaha (Airport), Jan. 1949, 1; Monthly Climatological Summary (WB Form 1030), Lincoln (Airport), January, 1949, 1; *Climatological Data: Nebraska*, (January, 1949), 2 (general summary), 6-7 (Table 3).

⁵⁴ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, Appendix L-i.

⁵⁵ Peterson to Garfield County Clerk (copy, wire [Jan. 24, 1949]); Wires to Peterson from: Elvin Fickel, County Commissioner, Dawes County, Jan. 24, 1949; C. J. Tomek, County Clerk, Boyd County, Jan. 24, 1949; County Clerk [Sioux County], Jan. 24, 1949; R. K. Haskell, Clerk [Logan County], for County Commissioners, Jan. 24, 1949; Ernest Hoefener, County Commissioner, Wheeler County, Jan. 25, 1949; W. A. Summers, County Commissioner, Wheeler County, Jan. 25, 1949 (copy); R. F. Long, Hooker County Commissioner, Jan. 25, 1949; M. M. Baker, Chairman, County Board, Lincoln County, Jan. 24 [or 25], 1949, RG 1, Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers. See also press release, Jan. 25, 1949, 5:30 P.M. for text of governor's declaration of a state of emergency, RG 1, Box 59, Folder 625, Peterson Papers. Not all counties in north-central and western Nebraska reported hardship. See wires to Peterson from: L. B. Harrison, County Clerk [Scotts Bluff County], Jan. 24, 1949; County Commissioner, Deuel County, Jan. 24, 1949; I. L. Pindell, County Clerk, Cheyenne County, Jan. 24, 1949; John McCord, County Clerk [Garden County], Jan. 25, 1949, and letter from Margaret Simpson, County Clerk, Sherman County, Jan. 24, 1949, RG 1, Box 60, Folder 627, Peterson Papers.

⁵⁶ Harry S. Truman to Peterson, Feb. 4, 1949, RG 1, Box 59, folder 625, Peterson Papers.

⁵⁷ Basil O'Connor to Peterson and governors of Colorado, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, and Utah (wire, copies), Jan. 27, 1949, ARC, NARA-CP.

⁵⁸ Val Peterson to Commanding General, Fifth Army, Jan. 27, 1949 (press release); Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas to Peterson, nd, Peterson to President Harry S. Truman [draft], Jan. 28 [1949], RG 1, Box 59, Folder 625, Peterson Papers.

⁵⁹ Harry S. Truman to Peterson, Feb. 4, 1949, RG 1, Box 59, Folder 625, Peterson Papers.

⁶⁰ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 1; Appendix A.

⁶¹ John C. Wilson, Vice President, Area Manager, American National Red Cross, Midwestern Area, St. Louis, to Mr. Eaton, Feb. 10, 1949, enclosing copy of report to Mr. [Basil] O'Connor, President, American National Red Cross, Western Plains States Snow Storm DR-386 and Operations Snowbound, Feb. 9, 1949, ARC, NARA-CP; Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 2, 5.

⁶² Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 4, 8-9; Appendices A, B, C, K, L, M, O, W, and map of Snowbound command areas and sub-areas, inside back cover.

⁶³ John C. Wilson, Vice President, Area Manager, American National Red Cross, Midwestern Area, St. Louis, to Mr. Eaton, Feb. 10, 1949, enclosing memorandum to [Basil] O'Connor, Feb. 9, 1949, DR 386, ARC, NARA-CP; Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, Appendix N.

⁶⁴ Broady [no first name] to Peterson, Jan. 28, 1949 (wire, transcription of amateur radio broadcast), Peterson Papers.

⁶⁵ Guy N. Henninger, Adjutant General, to Peterson, Feb. 1, 4, 7, 11, 1949, RG, Box 60, Folder 628, Peterson Papers. Adjutant General Henninger submitted detailed daily reports to Governor Peterson on Operation Snowbound and Nebraska National Guard activities, including specific deployment of equipment. The number of Guardsmen on duty varied from day to day.

⁶⁶ Dawes and Damkroger, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Holt County, 1949," 4, 20, 53, 55-57, 79-82; Robert B. Herrington, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Cherry County, 1949," 45-47; Willis R. Thurber, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Garfield, Loup and Wheeler Counties, 1949," 48-49. The foregoing extension reports show the role of county agents in relief work. In addition to their liaison work with the Army and Red Cross, County Agents Dawes, Herrington, and Thurber performed other relief services.

⁶⁷ William P. Bullock, Kenneth Van Skike, and Viola Shepherd, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Cheyenne County, 1949," 2-9, 56-57; Paul E. Miller, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Kimball County, 1949," 3, 46.

⁶⁸ Calef, "The Winter of 1948-49 in the Great Plains," 280-81, 284.

⁶⁹ Dawes and Damkroger, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Holt County, 1949," 4, 20, 53, 55-57, 79-82. Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, strongly emphasized the importance of military

liaison with local citizens.

⁷⁰ Herrington, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Cherry County, 1949," 45-47.

⁷¹ United States Air Force, "History of the Kearney Air Force Base and Twenty-Seventh Fighter Wing (TE), Jan., 1949" (document courtesy Lt. Col. Alan H. Clair, Inquiries Division, USAF Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama); interview by author with Col. Don E. Kahley, USAF (Ret.), San Diego, Calif., Mar. 25, 1988. Kahley was stationed at Offutt Air Force Base (Omaha) and was aboard one Haylift flight. Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 9, briefly details procedures for the airlifts.

⁷² "History of Kearney Air Force Base, Jan. 1949." Air Force data on tonnage of hay drops from planes flying from Kearney Air Base is confusing. Compare figures in "History Kearney Air Force Base, Jan. 1949," with data in United States Air Force, "Operation Haylift 1949: SAC Participation," tables 11, 13 (latter document courtesy Dr. Henry Narducci, HQ SAC, Offutt AFB).

⁷³ Kahley, interview, March 25, 1988, noted Haylift missions from Offutt. Numerical data on the Offutt flights is found in USAF, Operation "Haylift" 1949: SAC Participation, table, 11. For comments supporting Governor Peterson's reservations about Operation Haylift, see Orval G. Martin to Peterson, Jan. 25, 1949, RG 1, Box 48, Folder 491, Peterson Papers; Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 18.

⁷⁴ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 26.

⁷⁵ Ibid., *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 8, and Appendices I and W-ii, summarize Air Force participation on the Plains but do not mention the work of the 2151st Air Rescue Squadron.

⁷⁶ *Chadron Record*, Jan. 26, 1949, 1.

⁷⁷ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 5, 25.

⁷⁸ *Hammond's Highway and Railway Map of Nebraska*, ca. 1950; Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 20-22; meteorologist Arthur C. Strong agreed that east-west roads would have been much more prone to blockage than those running north-south (interview, May 11, 1990). So, too, did Neil Becker, recalling the east-west road that went past his family's Pierce County farm (interview, Apr. 9, 1999). Rachel Greenfield, whose two sisters lived off the frequently blocked Highway 183 in southern Rock County, understandably did not concur (interview, Jan. 8, 1992). Highway 183 would not receive a hard surface until 1963, when the route also was shortened (See Centennial Book Committee, *Rock County Centennial 1888-1998* [Bassett: Rock County Historical Society, 1987], 37). Such improvements undoubtedly rendered the route less vulnerable to extreme winter conditions.

⁷⁹ Dawes and Damkroger, "Extension Work, Holt County, 1949," 55; *The Holt County Independent*, Feb. 3, 1949, credited County Agent Dawes and

the Holt County Soil Conservation District with the building of the cargo sleds. In his extension report, cited above, Dawes said that the cargo taken to the Gibson School was about fifteen tons.

⁸⁰ For another account noting the importance of local people as guides for bulldozer operators, see Boyd and Ella Boelter, Inman, Nebr., "Experiences in the 48-49 Blizzards."

⁸¹ *Climatological Data: Nebraska* (Feb. 1949), 30-32 (Table 5).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 22, Appendix LL.

⁸⁴ Ibid., Appendix Z.

⁸⁵ Henry Hart, *The Dark Missouri* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 71.

⁸⁶ See Hart, *The Dark Missouri*, 120-35, and Robert Kelley Schneiders, *Unruly River: Two Centuries of Life Along the Missouri* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 162-86.

⁸⁷ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 181.

⁸⁸ See Michael L. Tate, *The Frontier Army in the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

⁸⁹ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 8, 9, 11; Appendices W, JJ.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁹¹ Ibid., Appendix AA-ii.

⁹² Ibid., 5, 11, Appendices Q-i, ii, iv, R-i, T.

⁹³ Ibid., 2-3.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 15, 16, 27, 29.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 17, 20 (narrative).

⁹⁶ H. E. Bruce to Vernon H. Zimmerman, Feb. 16, 1949; memo of telephone conversation, Don Stout and Henry Eichman, Midwestern Area, American National Red Cross, Feb. 24, 1949, ARC-NARA-CP.

⁹⁷ C. F. Rowland, Assistant Administrator, Disaster Services, American National Red Cross, Emergency Assistance to Indians: Snowstorm Disaster Jan.-Feb., 1949, Feb. 24, 1949, ARC, NARA-CP.

⁹⁸ John C. Wilson, Vice President, Area Manager, American National Red Cross, Midwestern Area, St. Louis, to Chapter Chairmen, Feb. 28, 1949, enclosing "Highlights and Statistics of American Red Cross Blizzard Operations From January 2 Through February 24, 1949," ARC, NARA-CP; "Final Financial Report, Nebraska, Western Plains States Snowstorm," 190-01-386, Feb. 26, 1951, ARC, NARA-CP. According to Robert C. Edson to Gordon Stone, 190-01-386, Mar. 15, 1949, there were 1,128 "Volunteers Regularly Assigned" in ARC work in Nebraska. However, the ARC's Reports and Analysis Division, Office of Statistical and Reference Information, in its "Nebraska Consolidated Chapter Disaster Relief Report, Snowstorms" (Western Plains States Snowstorms), dated July 17,

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1950, stated that there were thirteen volunteer nurses and 456 "other" volunteers. This document gave the ARC's "Number of Paid Workers" in Nebraska as two nurses and fifty-two "other" persons. DR 386, ARC; NARA-CP. Perhaps the higher figure included persons who did not work regularly. See Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, Appendix N-iii.

⁹⁹ Robert C. Edson to Gordon Stone, Mar. 15, 1949; Statistics, "Western Plains States Snowstorms," 190-01-386; Author's compilation of final Nebraska chapter financial reports, "Western Plains States Snowstorms, Jan.-Feb., 1949," American National Red Cross, Code 386, Feb. 26, 1951; "Disaster Relief Report," Douglas County, DR 386, *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁰ ARC, "Disaster Relief Report, Holt County, Nebr.," "Western Plains States Snowstorms, Jan.-Feb., 1949," including "Corrected Copy," Mar. 18, 1949; "Final Financial Report, Holt County, Feb. 26, 1951," DR386, *Ibid*.

¹⁰¹ Brig. Gen. Guy N. Henninger, *Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Nebraska 1949-1950* (Lincoln, 1950), 21-23; AF-CAP Liaison Office, Omaha, to Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Civil Air Patrol, United States Air Force, Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, D.C., Feb. 24, 1949, ARC, NARA-CP.

¹⁰² Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 10; Appendix O.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 9-10, Appendices N-ii, O, U, HH, II.

¹⁰⁴ Val Peterson to Harry S. Truman (draft, no date), RG 1, Box 59, Folder 625, Peterson Papers, Department of the Air Force, History of Kearney Air Force Base and 27th Fighter Wing (TE), 1 January [-] 31 January 1949, 2, courtesy, Headquarters, United Air Force Research Center, Maxwell Air Force Base (Alabama).

¹⁰⁵ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 9, Appendices K, M.

¹⁰⁶ John C. Wilson to Mr. Eaton, Feb. 10, 1949, enclosing report to Mr. O'Connor, "Western Plains States Snowstorms DR-386 and Operations Snowbound, Feb. 9, 1949"; Press release, Gen. Lewis Pick, Feb. 28, 1949, ARC, NARA-CP.

¹⁰⁷ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 186-87.

¹⁰⁸ State of Nebraska, Department of Roads and Irrigation, *Official Map Nebraska Highways*, July 1, 1949, NSHS; Department of Roads, *Nebraska: 1991-1992 State Highway Map*.

¹⁰⁹ Mr. and Mrs. J. Fred Christensen to Val Peterson, Jan. 13, 1949, Box 48, Folder 491, Peterson Papers.

¹¹⁰ Weather Bureau, *Climatological Data: Nebraska*, Vol. LIV (Mar. 1949), 36, 38-39.

¹¹¹ 112 Dawes and Damkroger, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Holt County," 1949, 82; *Climatological Data: Nebraska*, Vol. LIV (1949 Summary), 206; W. A. Buchanan, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Antelope County," 1949, 39.

¹¹² Memorandum, James S. Pittenger to Governor, July 29, 1949, Box 60, Folder 626, Peterson Papers; Calef, "Winter of 1948-49 in the Great Plains," 286.

¹¹³ *Nebraska State Journal*, Feb. 5, 1949; American Red Cross, "Nebraska Consolidated Chapter Disaster Relief Report," July 17, 1950, DR 386, ARC, NARA-CP.

¹¹⁴ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 11.

¹¹⁵ Patricia L. Coble, Alliance, to author, May 1, 1992, enclosing letter from Mrs. J. H. Urbanovsky to Mrs. Frank R. Molacek, published in *Colfax County Call* (Schuyler), Feb. 24, 1949.

¹¹⁶ For excellent examples of people who endured the isolation and hardship with fortitude see *Morning World-Herald*, Feb. 5; *Sunday World-Herald*, Feb. 6, 1949; *Holt County Independent*, Feb. 10, 1949 (letter from Floyd E. Crawford, dated Feb. 1, 1949); *Burwell Tribune*, Feb. 10, 1949 (editorial). "R.F.D.," by Max Coffey in the *Morning World-Herald*, Feb. 9, 1949, has an excellent anecdote about being prepared.

¹¹⁷ See the following "Annual Reports, Extension Work, 1949": W. A. Buchanan, Antelope County, 39; J. F. Decker and Margaret E. Schluckebier, Box Butte County, 38; Robert A. Pollard, Harold J. Foster, and Mrs. Doris Huffaker, Greeley County, 6, 31; Russell Hughes and Mrs. Lucille Erlewine, Keith, Arthur counties, 26; Hugh M. Renard, Pierce County, 44; Harold Ingalls, Sioux County, 21.

¹¹⁸ See the following Annual Reports, Extension Work, 1949: Eugene Newton and Dorothy Shetler, Brown, Rock, and Keya Paha counties, 143; Herrington, Cherry County, 43, 44, 47; William R. Main, Garden County, 1, 37; Miller, Kimball County, 34, 47; Francis L. Scriven, Morrill County, 13; Ingalls, Sioux County, 10, 19. A news story estimated 18,000 sheep had perished in Cheyenne County, but this loss was not mentioned in the county extension report. Frank Bataillon, interviewed Feb. 1, 1992, said a rancher grazing 10,000 sheep on Sioux Ordnance Depot land lost the entire herd.

¹¹⁹ Annual Reports, Extension Work, 1949: Newton and Shetler, Brown, Rock, and Keya Paha counties, 143; Bullock, Van Skike, and Shepherd, Cheyenne County, 56; Miller, Kimball County, 34. Miller's Kimball County report said that there was "no shelter" for the sheep lost to the unidentified stockman. A Texas stockman who sustained the heaviest losses in Kimball County told the *Western Nebraska Observer* that his sheep had drifted with the wind from corrals.

¹²⁰ See also Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 91.

¹²¹ Herrington, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Cherry County," 1949, 48.

¹²² Walter E. Spilker and Charlotte Bruce, "Annual Report, Extension Work, Lincoln County," 1949, 7.

¹²³ Alleman, *Blizzard 1949*, 73.

¹²⁴ For winter-killing of wheat in the southern Panhandle, see the following Annual Reports,

Extension Work, 1949: Bullock, Van Skike, and Shepherd, Cheyenne County, 49; Miller, Kimball County, 7; Scriven, Morrill County, 11. For damage to wheat in eastern Nebraska, see the following Annual Reports, Extension Work, 1949: Clyde D. Claussen, Colfax County, 8; W. R. Wicks, Arnold W. Peterson, and Clara Noyes, Douglas County, 8, 64; Philip S. Sutton, Gage County, 3; Verdon H. Peterson and Francis J. Runty, Annual Report, Lancaster County, 11-12.

¹²⁵ See the following Annual Reports, Extension Work, 1949: Elvin Lawrence and Eleanor Jane Stall, Boone County, 7; M. L. Gould, Custer County, 8; Walter G. Sire, Boyd County, 29; Spilker and Bruce, Lincoln County, 7; Renard, Pierce County, 7; Milton R. Stafford, Thomas, Blaine, Grant, and Hooker counties, 37; C. C. Dale and Katherine Helzer, Valley County, 2.

¹²⁶ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 18.

¹²⁷ Union Pacific Railroad, "The Blizzard of '49," circular enclosed with dividend mailing, Apr. 1, 1949, File No. U-8-C27A, UP Secretary's Office, UPRR Papers; Clippings, *New York Herald-Tribune*, Feb. 9, 10, 14, 1949; *Wyoming State Tribune* (Cheyenne), Feb. 10, 11, 1949; *Wyoming Eagle* (Cheyenne), Feb. 12, 1949, File No U-8-C27, telegrams, George F. Ashby, Feb. 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 1949; Memorandum, DOC to Ashby, Feb. 15, 1949, "Snow Storm Conditions," UPRR Papers; Calef, "Winter of 1948-49 in the Great Plains," 285.

¹²⁸ Union Pacific Railroad Company, "The Blizzard of '49," and "Union Pacific's 'Operation Snowbound,'" circulars enclosed with dividend mailing, Apr. 1, 1949; press release, Steve Hannagan Assoc., New York, datelined Omaha, Feb. 23, 1949, File No U-8-C27A, UP Secretary's Office, UPRR Papers.

¹²⁹ For example, see the following memoranda G. I. Giles, "Train #102 from Cheyenne 2:30 A.M. January 6th en route to Chicago (Held at Cheyenne account [of] Blizzard Jan. 3-4-5, 1949)," A. J. Johnson, Omaha, to W. Conrey, Feb. 9, 1949; R. R. Chamberlain, Salt Lake City, to W. J. Thomas, Feb. 12, 1949; R. S. Farley, Omaha, to W. Conrey, Feb. 15, 1949, MS 3761, SG 22, S26-27, Box 34, UPRR Papers.

¹³⁰ A. E. Stoddard to E. G. Smith, May 14, 1949, File No. U-8-C27A, "Comments Re 'Blizzard of '49,' Secretary's Office, UPRR Papers; Klein, *Union Pacific*, Vol. II, 437-58.

¹³¹ See Annette Atkins, "Minnesota: Left of Center and Out of Place," in James H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 9.

¹³² Blizzard emergency area map and caption, *Morning World-Herald*, Jan. 28, 1949; Nebraska State Data Center, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Report 2A.1, "Population of Nebraska Counties: 1950 to 1990"; <http://quickfacts.census.gov/>

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qfd/states/31/31003.html; U.S. Census, 2000.

¹³³ For interesting details on midcentury education in rural Nebraska, see *Ainsworth Star-Journal*, Jan. 20, 1949, 1 ("Rural School Notes"), and Wayne O. Reed, *Nebraska Education: The Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to the Governor of the State of Nebraska for the Year Ending December 31, 1949* (Lincoln, 1950), 56–63.

¹³⁴ Don Cunningham, columnist for rural Nebraska papers, also declared that the storm had shown the negative side of the dependence on

electricity. See *Rock County Leader*, Dec. 2, 1948, 6.

¹³⁵ *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 22, Apr. 23, 1994; *Sunday World-Herald*, Apr. 24, 1994.

¹³⁶ Mrs. Marvin Fuller to Val Peterson, Jan. 12, 1949, Box 48, Folder 491, Peterson Papers.

¹³⁷ Fifth Army, *Disaster Operation Snowbound*, 21.

¹³⁸ See also Harl and Kay Dalstrom, "It's Going Down in History," 300.

¹³⁹ On the decline of farm poultry and egg

production since the 1950s, see Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 135–59.

¹⁴⁰ Frederick C. Luebke, "Nebraska: Time, Place, and Culture," in Madison, ed., *Heartland*, 244.

¹⁴¹ This topic is discussed in the author's paper, "Coping with Winter in South Dakota, 1948–49 and 1996–1997: A Comparison," presented at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Oct. 2, 1998.



Scotia, Greeley County. In the winter of 1948–49, with towns covered in deep, silent snow, travel at a standstill, and businesses closed, a vast area of the state seemed virtually deserted. NSHS-RG3139-134

Administration: Tenth Air Force” “Domestic Emergency Relief Team” “Operation Hayride” “Operation Haylift” “Sno-gos” “Fifth Army’s Disaster Force Snowbound” “American Legion” “Pick-Sloan Plan” “U S Army Corps of Engineers”

Photographs:

Ernest Kiel home, Lewellen, Garden County; H R Holcomb home, Chambers, Holt County; Road near H R Holcomb farm; Louis Vap farm, Glenville, Clay County; bulldozers from Council Bluffs, Iowa, near McLean, Pierce County; Ray Mickels, Gene Mickels, Donald Mickels, Madrid, Perkins County; Herman Boerger ranch brooder house near Rose, Rock County; Chadron with forty-one inches of snow; Chicago and North Western locomotive; Frank Battailion on apartment roof; Freed cow, Eldon Miller farm near Belmont, Dawes County; rotary plow and two locomotives on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy line; Chicago and North Western line crew near Chadron; Darrell Holmes, a relief pilot; Vehicle tracks near a snowbound Greeley County farm; Civil Air Patrol airplane crash near Alliance; helicopter in the relief effort; sleigh and wagon, Anselmo, Custer County; Farm tractor pulling wagon, Anselmo, Custer County; curious dog and buried pickup near Thedford; Lillian Cunningham and two brothers with dirty dust layer atop snow in Bayard; Ben Fuelberth family, Pierce County, on sled; crew clearing forty-one inches of snow; Chicago and North Western locomotive 2320 makes slow progress; District 156 returning schools; Jerry and Lorraine Greenwood, Whiteclay, Sheridan County; drifted road at Lester Broadfoot ranch near Halsey, Thomas County; aircraft cockpit January 24, 1949; Omaha World-Herald cartoon, “Another Pick Plan”; “Omaha World-Herald Operation Snowbound cartoon; Army Weasel